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Serpent Worship in Ancient India

B.C. Sinha

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Serpent Worship in Anci

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It is very interesting to have a knowledge of the mysterious serpent-world. Many nations have known and still practise this form of animal-worship. In the words of Vogel, "But it would be difficult to quote another instance in which it takes such a prominent place in literature, folk-lore and art as it does in India. Nor would it be possible to name another country where the development of this cult can be studied during a period which may be estimated at no less than three millennia."

Serpent worship has been quite common in Ancient India. The living tradition of that cult is Naga-Panchami, a festival which is celebrated throughout India. In Southern India, the deity under whose name the serpent is worshipped is Subramani. The shrine is located in the western part of Mysore.

Serpents played an important role in the life of ancient Indian people. They were worshipped for prosperity and offsprings. Serpent is supposed to confer fertility on barren women. They guard the treasures buried in the ground, and award them to humans. They also had the reputation of giving rain.

The book is very interesting to read and dives deep into a most ancient cult of the country.

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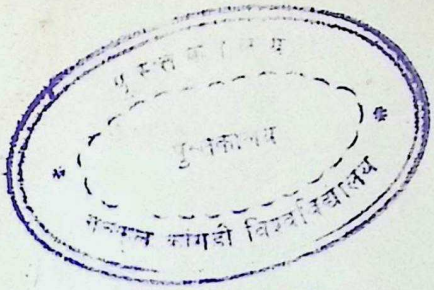

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With Compliments
to
our Vice-chancellor
By the author

B C Sinha
5.10.82

(B.C. SINHA)

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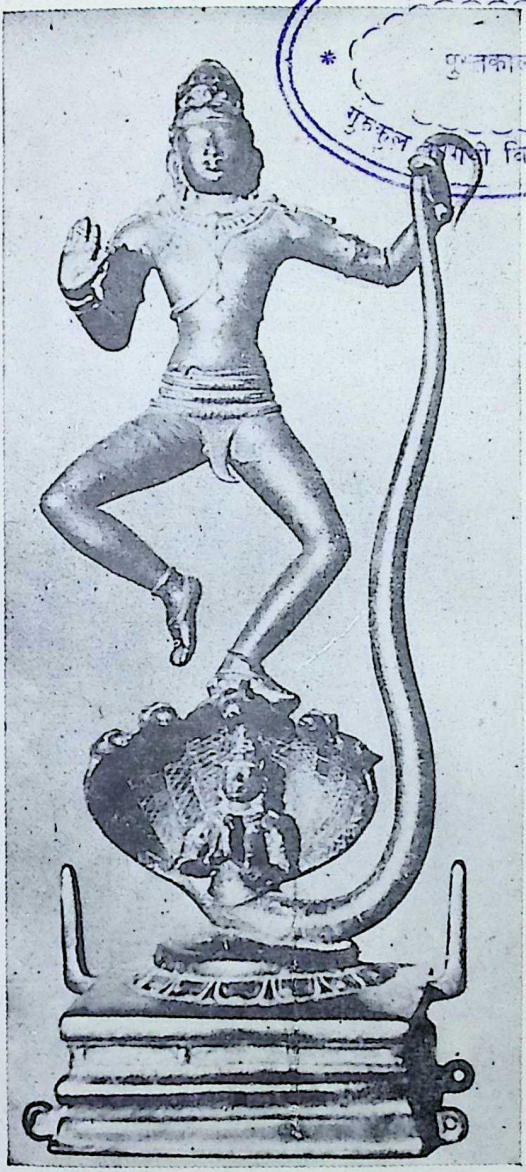

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SERPENT WORSHIP IN ANCIENT INDIA

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पश्यामि देवांस्तव देव देहे
सर्वांस्तथा भूतविशेषसंघान् ।
ब्रह्माणमीशं कमलासनस्थ
मृषीश्च सर्वानुरगांश्च दिव्यान ।।

(गीता ११-१५)

(Arjuna said : I see all the gods, O God, in Thy body and also the hosts of various classes of beings, Brahmā, the Lord seated on the lotus, all the sages and the celestial serpents.)

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Dedicated to Lord Śiva who is the third god of the Hindu Trimurti, in which he represents the principle of destruction. Serpents, emblems of eternity, form his ear-rings called Nāga Kuṇḍala

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Preface

It is very interesting to have a knowledge of the mysterious serpent world. Many nations have known and still practise this form of animal worship. In the words of J. Vogel, "But it would be difficult to quote another instance in which it takes such a prominent place in literature, folk-lore, and art, as it does in India. Nor would it be possible to name another country where the development of this cult can be studied during a period which may be estimated at no less than three millennia." For a very long time the defied serpents have been haunting the imagination of the Hindus. It is very astonishing that the serpents appear in a variety of aspect in Indian literature and art. Sometimes they are endowed with magic properties. Frequently, they have the character of a water-spirit. They are capable of assuming any form they like. Very often they appear in human shape. Then they become a pious ascetic and may even develop into a self-denying saint. Brāhmaṇical and Buddhist literature is full of serpent lores.

Snake worship is common throughout India, both of the sculptural form and of the living animal. The sculpture is invariably of the form of the Nāga or Cobra. Sometimes there is a single Nāga, the hood being spread open. Occasionally the sculptured figures are nine in number, and this form is called the "Nava Nāga". The living snake is worshipped everywhere in India. Nāga-Panchami is a famous festival of serpent worship, throughout the whole country. In Southern India, the deity under whose name the snake is worshipped is Subramaṇi. The shrine is located in the western part of Mysore and the image is a shapeless lump of earth. Serpent worship is especially resorted for prosperity and offsprings. Serpent is supposed to confer fertility on barren women.

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Nāgas played an important role in the life of ancient India. When Alexander entered India, his soldiers had been mightily impressed by the country's serpents, which had terrified them with their sinister hissing and with their glittering eyes 'as large as Macedonian Shields'. The Nāgas lived in the subterranean world and on the beds of rivers and lakes. Their capital was Bhogavati. Nāga kings had the reputation of being noble-minded and very powerful. "Communication between their kingdom and the human world was established through the medium of caves and ant-hills, both of which occupied an important place in Indian popular tradition." The serpents guarded treasures buried in the ground, and awarded them to humans. They also had the reputation of giving rain. The skin they shed was supposed to have the power of granting invisibility to the one who picked it up, and to ensure him long life. In fact the process of dropping off the skin symbolized the soul liberating itself from the cycle of rebirths. H. Zimmer holds that among the motifs from early Mesopotamian art which are continuing in the traditions of India is the pattern of entwined surpent-pair. This device commonly appears votive slabs erected to serpent genii. Such stone tables are called Nāgakals, variously decorated with serpent forms. They are votive gifts from women desiring offsprings. They are set up in temple courtyards, at the entrance of villages and towns, near ponds or under holy trees. In Mesopotamia this device appears on the sacrificial goblet of King Gudea of Lagash. We find the familiar pair of serpents entwined and facing each other. In the words of Zimmer, "The motif must have diffused into India at an extremely remote era before the arrival of Āryans."

My thanks are due to all those authors whose books have been of much use to me.

I am highly indebted to Dr. T.R. Seth, Lecturer in the Zoology Department of Gurukula Kangri University for his helpful discussion and enabling me to go through his Ph.D. thesis "Morphology of Common Indian Cobra".

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1

Serpent and its Chief Peculiarities

Serpents are divided into two sub-families, i.e., the sea serpents and the land serpents. They comprise an important reptillian fauna of our country. Dr. T.R. Seth[1] observes, "However, a complete account of the anatomy of any Indian species of snakes is not available for ready reference. Probably, the mythical and spiritual beliefs of the Indians are chiefly responsible for it."

India is quite rich with snake fauna but good majority of them are non-poisonous. It is an important point to note that a sizable number of deaths occur not because of snake poisoning but because of fright and ignorance. Indian poisonous snakes comprise mainly the cobra, the krait, the pitvipers, the vipers and the sea snakes. These can be distinguished from the non-poisonous snakes by examining the tail, size of scales, plates and shields found over the body. In the words of Parker and Haswell[2], "Snakes appear to have been derived from a lizard ancestry in Mesozoic times. They are Squamata with long, narrow bodies, typically devoid of limbs."

EXTERNAL FEATURES

The body of the serpent is elongated, narrow and cylindrical, usually tapering towards the posterior end, and sometimes

1. Ph. D. Thesis, p. 1.
2. A Text Book of Zoology, p. 497.

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with, but more usually without a constriction behind the head. In the absence of limbs, the beginning of the short cadual region is indicated only by the position of the cloacal opening. Lacking functional limbs, serpents move on land or in water by the movement of spinal column and muscles. This movement pushes the sinous body horizontally against the resistant surrounding medium. One of the most interesting form of reptillian progression is that of various tropical and sub-tropical tree-snakes. These are thin and elongated, making for greater distribution of weight as they glide across leaves and twigs from one tree to another. The serpentine movement of an angry snake gives a much greater speed than is actually achieved. It is more than four miles per hour.

The mouth of a serpent is capable of being very widely opened by the free articulation of the lower jaw, and it is this which chiefly distinguishes it from the snake-like lizard. Other points of distinction are the absence of movable eyelids in the snake and also the absence of a tympanum.

The largest living serpents of India are the Reticulated Python. They reach to a length of 33 feet. The biggest venomous snake is the Indo-Malayan King Cobra, which may grow to 18 feet. The longest sea-snakes grow to a length of 8 feet. Sea-snakes are sometimes extremely poisonous. They cannot move efficiently out of water.

POISONOUS APPARATUS OF A SERPENT

The poisonous serpents have a poison apparatus, comprising a pair of poison glands, a pair of poison ducts and a pair of fangs. The poison glands are situated, one on either side of the upper jaw behind the eyes. A duct takes the venom secrated from each gland to the fang, which injects the venom into the body of the prey. Fangs are the specialised teeth of the upper jaw which are tubular and grooved. "Usually a pair of fangs are present but reserve fangs may be present behind the functional ones to replace the later when lost. The fangs are small in sea snake but quite long in Viper. While biting, the snake opens mouth, erects the fangs by throwing the head slightly backward and finally strikes it. While doing so, the glands are

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pressed and the venom is ejected out from the tip of the fang into the wound. The whole apparatus acts as a hypodermic syringe."[3]

VENOM

The venom of the serpent is yellowish in colour and has no taste and odour. In contains thirty per cent poisonous proteids dissolved in organic acid. Each kind of venom has its own peculiarity and different toxity. Cobra-venom affects the respiratory system. The venom of the Viper affects the heart and the nervous system. Antevenin injections are given to the victims of serpent bite. It is an important point to note that the skull bones of the serpent play the major role in the biting mechanism. All these bones are loosely articulated and are movable.

HEARING IN SERPENTS

External ears, the tympanic cavity, and eustachean tube are lacking. The ear of the serpent consists only of the columella auris and the internal ear. The serpents are not capable of receiving the sound vibrations travelling through the air, but they receive it through the earth or some solid. For example, the sound vibrations caused by the foot steps are transmitted to columella auris and then they are passed on to the internal ear.

HABITAT

Serpents are found almost everywhere, i.e., in forests, in open country, in gardens of the town, in godowns, in the basement of a tree, and in water. Ruined habitations furnish ideal quarter for the serpents. Sometimes, the serpents have been found climbing a tree, the object usually being the plunder of some nests of the bird.

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3. *V. P. Agrawal and R.C. Dalela* : A Text Book of Vertebrate Zoology, p. 396.

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HABITS

Serpents are usually not aggressive. When disturbed in its native haunts it always tries to escape and usually succeeds in doing so. But it strikes before it reaches to a place of safety. Young cobras are much more dangerous than the adults as a rule. They are more alert and easily excited to strike. "The most notable habit in the cobra is the remarkable pose which it forms when alarmed. It erects the anterior part of the body to a remarkable degree and flattens its neck to form the so-called hood."[4] This hood is formed by the action of the muscles operating upon the ribs in the region behind the neck. The serpent hisses in an explosive manner in the erect position. Hissing occurs during inspiration and expiration. The cobra emits out its tongue during both.

One of the striking matters about the cobra is the subject of 'charming'. Most of the authorities on the subject disbelieve it. Wall says, "If one is to believe the wonderful theories, told in good faith, I have no doubt about 'charming'. One must explain it by assuming that snake charmers are possessed of some occult forces not apparent to the spectators."

The cobra or the Nāga seems to show a decided tendency to a social life. It lives in couples. This is specially true during breeding season. Some snake charmers say that the cobra grows about an inch a month. T.R. Seth has observed that the growth is rapid during first year and progressively diminishes in subsequent years.

Sloughing is a very common occurrence in serpents. But there is no regularity in ecdysis, which may occur at intervals ranging between three weeks to three months. During the period of sloughing the Nāga appears to be dull and so if it comes out in an open area it is most likely to meet death. This is so because the serpent is virtually blind for some time due to the formation of opaque disc above the eye.

The serpents feed on rats, frogs, toads and birds. Other creatures are also taken as circumstances allow. Sexes in the cobra cannot be recognised externally. Deoras has mentioned

4. *T.R. Seth*: Morphology of Common Indian Cobra, (Ph. D. Thesis), p. 23.

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that the male bears a longer tail, and head on the hood is wider in the male as compared to that of the female.

In Nāga, copulation takes place in July to September. The young, which comes out of the egg, measures about seven inches. This size may go up to eleven inches.

CHIEF PECULIARITIES OF SERPENT

Before explaining the origin and evolution of Serpent Worship in Ancient India, we must start from the animal itself. The first point in this connection is that our remote ancestors regarded it as a demoniac being endowed with magical power. Atharvaveda contains numerous interesting references regarding the snakes. The magical spells in the Atharvaveda are resorted to avert the danger of serpents. Two methods are followed. One is to propitiate the snake-demon and to solicit their protection. In the other method charms are wielded against the serpents to counteract their magical power and, if possible, to destroy them. As the serpents regularly make their appearance at the commencement of the rainy season, there is a belief that the advent of the rain is due to the magical power of those reptiles.

In the words of Eusebius, "The serpent alone of all animals, without legs or arms or any of the usual appliances for locomotion, still moves with singular celerity." The Amarakoṣa contains many synonyms for a snake, which have reference to the animal's peculiar way of moving. The popular belief in this connection is, that the snake is in possession of legs which are only visible to those of his own kind. There is a famous proverb, "Only a snake can see a snake's legs." It is implied by the term Guḍapāda. The absence of external organs of hearing led to the strange conception that the serpent could hear by means of his eyes. Hence the term Chakṣuśravas is used for a snake. The curious way in which the animal protrudes his tongue has led to the belief that the creature was content to feed on the wind. The poet Bhartrihari says that the Creator has ordained the wind as food for the snakes.

The casting of the skin is another chief peculiarity of the

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serpent. In Ṛgveda[5], the gushing stream of strained Soma is compared to a serpent creeping out of his slough. From a hymn of the Atharvaveda it is clear that the sloughs are collected on account of the magical powers ascribed to them. Snake's skin is supposed to procure invisibility. In the words of Vogel,[6] "The practice of casting its skin suggested longevity or even immortality in the snake, an idea which can also be traced in ancient India." The sloughing is a favourite simile found in Vedic and epic literature. It indicates to the freeing one's self from the evil and to the liberation from mundane existence.

Aitareya Brāhamaṇa says, "The gods smote away evil; in accordance with their smiting away the serpents smote away evil; having smitten away evil, they lay aside their old worn-out skin and continue with a new one. He smiteth away evil who knoweth this."[7] We read in Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad, "Like a snake's skin, dead and cast off, lieth upon an ant-hill, likewise lieth this body, but that which is bodyless, immortal, and life, is pure Brahman, is pure light."[8] In the Śānti Parva of Mahābhārata it is said, "Like a ruru deer droppeth its old horn and like a serpent leaveth its skin and regardless goeth its way, in like manner he that is liberated relinquisheth evil."

Medical properties are ascribed to the skins of black serpents. In the words of James Hastings,[9] "Eating a serpent's flesh, or anointing with its fat, or applying part of its body to the wound, was a remedy against snake-bite among Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Jews, American Indians, Abipones, Thonga, and other races, and is also found in folk medicine in many lands still—an example of the principle that like cures like." We have a story in Pañchatantra which shows how a blind man recovers his sight by the vapour issuing from pieces of a poisonous snake cooked in milk.

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5. Ṛgveda, IX, 86, 44.
6. Indian Serpent Lore, p. 14.
7. Keith's translation.
8. IV, 4, 7.
9. Encyclopaedia of Religions and Ethics, Vol. XI, p. 406.

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The most dreadful and mysterious property possessed by certain species of serpents is the power of inflecting a sudden death. It has given rise to many superstitions. The Nāga Takṣaka by his bite reduced a banyan tree to ashes. The destructive action of the serpent's poison resembles that of the all-devouring fire. There is a belief that the Nāga could cause harm by its mere breath or by its sight alone. Jātakas tell us that the Nāga can carry destruction by the fiery blast of his nostrils. "The pool of the Yamunā infested by the Nagā Kāliya is described as overcast with a dense smoke caused by the poison-born fire, the surface of the water being hot with venomous flames. Even the birds of the sky did not approach it, and when grass fell in its water it was burnt by its heat." The belief that the serpent can kill by means of its sight is quite widespread. Our epics tell us that the serpents are poison-eyed. It is for this reason that the Nāga heroes of Buddhist stories, close their eyes when they see their enemy approaching them. The pious Nāga King Champaka, seeing the snake-charmer, says to himself, "My poison is powerful, and if I am angry and send forth the breath of my nostrils, his body will be shattered like a handful of chaff; then my virtue will be broken. I will not look upon him."

Serpent's poison is credited with a healing virtue also. The episode of Bhima's visit to the Nāga-loka illustrates that vegetable poison is killed by animal poison. In a Jātaka story, a physician tries to cure his patient by inducing the snake to suck its own poison out of the wound. But the snake refuses to do so. We can safely conclude that the idea did exist that the snakes themselves produce an antidote against their own poison. In Europe, too, such a belief prevailed during the middle ages.

An interesting belief about the serpents is that they lose their poison at the mere sight of Garuḍa.

There is a belief that the Nāgas are in possession of untold wealth in precious metal and stones. Rājataraṅgiṇi informs us that Mahāpadma, the Nāga of the Vular lake, had promised the Kashmir King a gold-mine on condition that the latter will save him from a Dravidian sorcerer. But the king fulfils his promise in an offensive manner to the Nāgas' self

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respect. So, he is shown a mine of copper-ore. Vogel[10] observes, "The possession of treasures, magic gems, and spells is, of course, a characteristic which the Nāgas share with other classes of divine and semi-divine beings. The Nāgas are also praised for having accomplished wonderful works of art, especially in the days of Nāgārjuna."

10. Indian Serpent Lore, pp. 22-23.

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2

Origin of Serpent Worship

INTRODUCTION

There are different views regarding the origin of Nāga worship. James Fergusson holds that Nāgas were not originally serpents but serpent-worshippers—an aboriginal race of Turanian family inhabiting Northern India. He observes, "Any traces of serpent worship that may be found in the Vedas or earlier writings of the Āryans must either be interpolations of a later date or concessions to the superstitions of the subject races." Vogel strongly rejects this theory. He asserts, "Apart from these strange and baseless theories, Fergusson's book contains fair amount of useful information about ophiolatry as practised not only by the Indians but also among other nations of antiquity."[1]

DEMONIACAL BEINGS

The great German Indologist Herman Oldenberg held that the Nāgas belonged to that class of demoniacal beings which is best represented by the were-wolves. They often appear in human shape, as is also the case with were-wolves, tiger-men and swan-maidens. Oldenberg says :

"We cannot conclude our account of the mythic animal world without considering the relations which are believed

1. Indian Serpent Lore, p. 2.

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to exist between animal and human existence. The conception of a substantial unity between animal and man, which during the Vedic period is met with only in certain survivals, finds an expression in the belief in beings like were-wolves. Presumably, the tiger-men belong to this class, and certainly do the Nāgas, which seem to be men, but in reality are snakes. According to an ancient Buddhist text, their serpent nature manifests itself on two occasions, namely during sexual intercourse and sleep."

WATER SPIRIT

There is a view that the serpents are worshipped chiefly because of their power over the element of water. Hendrik Kern propounded the theory that the Nāgas are essentially water-spirits. They are personified forces of nature. The close relationship between serpents and water in a hot country like India is of vital significance. Serpents are said to haunt lakes and ponds and the sources of rivers. They are supposed to be givers of rain.

OLDHAM'S THEORY

C.F. Oldham has offered a different theory regarding Nāga-worship. In his opinion Nāgas were not demons, but people who claimed descent from the Sun and had the hooded serpent for a totem. Taxilā was the chief city of the Nāga people in North India. Takṣaka was one of their chiefs. It was on his return from a raid into the country of Taxilā that Janamejaya held his serpent sacrifice. The victims on this occasion were the Nāga prisoners, who were burned alive with Brāhmaṇical rites. This interpretation has met with very little support. In this connection, it is an important point to note that some Nāga-kings bear names which are identical with those of certain royal personages in the Mahābhārata.

DECEASED RULERS

It is worthy of note that in ancient India deceased rulers were sometimes worshipped in the form of a snake. This

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presents a new aspect of serpent worship. We do not have any positive proof for it. But there are legends about kings who were changed into serpents as a punishment of their evil deeds. A well known example is of King Nahuṣa, who was cursed by Agastya to live as a snake for ten thousand years.

TUTELAR DEITY

The serpent is often regarded as the tutelar deity of the house. Each domicile is believed to have a representative serpent, called the Vāstu-Sarpa. If the Vāstu-Sarpa is seen to abandon a house, it is regarded to be most unauspicious. The continuity of the family is supposed to be in danger. With reference to Southern India, we may quote Abbe Dubois[2], "If a snake happens to get into a house, far from turning out the inconvenient guest and killing it on the spot, they feed it plentifully and offer sacrifices to it daily." According to Crooke, the benevolent household snake represents the soul of some deceased ancestor which has taken up its residence there. The conception of the snake as the son of the earth is closely associated with the belief familiar from the fairy tales of Greece and Germany, which regards serpents as guardians of buried treasures. In the words of Crooke,[3] "It is a common Indian belief, that when a very rich man dies without an heir he cannot take away his thoughts from his treasure, and returns to guard it in the form of a monstrous serpent." Vogel observes,[4] "It is only natural that the possession of riches is attributed in no less a degree to the Nāgas who have, as it were, a double claim to wealth in that they combine the nature of serpents with that of demigods."

RESULT

From the above it is clear that there is a great difference of opinion regarding the origin of serpent worship. The fact remains that the problem cannot be solved in one-sided manner.

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2. Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies, p. 648.
3. Folklore of Northern India, Vol. II, p. 135.
4. Indian Serpent Lore, p. 21.

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Barth has rightly laid emphasis on the complicated character of Indian serpent worship. He says :

> "These brief indications are enough to show that the serpent religions of India form a complex hole and such as is not accounted for by viewing it as a simple worship of deprecation. We can distinguish in it: (1) The direct adoration of the animal, the most formidable and mysterious of all the enemies of men. (2) A worship of the deities of waters, springs, and rivers, symbolized by the waving form of the serpent. (3) Conception of the same kind as that of Vedic Ahi, and connected closely with the great myth of the storm and the struggle of light with darkness."[5]

Winternitz also emphasises on the many sided character of Indian serpent worship.

Several writers have put forward the opinion that serpent worship is un-Āryan in its origin. According to them, the Āryans adopted it from the aborigines of the Peninsula. We may safely assume that Indian ophiolatry had its first cause in the dread inspired by the poisonous reptiles. It is very difficult to explain how this dangerous animal came to be looked upon as the harbinger of prosperity. There is a widespread belief that the serpents have power to remove barrenness. In the whole of Western and Southern India, the Nāga is worshipped upto the present day by women who are desirous of offspring. We read of the Nāga hero of a Jātaka who is worshipped by the wayfarers and villagers who crave sons.

In the words of J. Auboyer:[6]

> "The Nāgas were sacred beings whom it was forbidden to touch, and whose complex characters made them equally feared and adored. Their aggressive tendencies were proverbial, and their vengeful spirit made them quite capable, supposedly, of exterminating an entire population, either by exuding the fatal poison contained in their fangs, or by suffocating their victims in their coils. They were also capable of blinding people with their foul breath, or killing them with the fire of their glance:

5. *Barth* : The Religions of India, pp. 266. f.
6. Daily Life in Ancient India, pp. 155-156.

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indeed, their gaze was so powerful that it could easily reduce a whole town to ashes. Yet, despite this, they were equally capable of coming to the aid of humans and could, like the Yakṣas, make barren women fertile."

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3

Serpent Worship in Vedic Period

BACKGROUND

Religion is the common property of all mankind. Its origin lies on the border-line which divides man from animals. But man never forgot the animals and gave them an important place in the objects of his worship. In fact there is a connecting link between man and beast even in religion. "Fear and love, fidelity and respect, would thus receive a decidedly religious aspect with certain animals. The relations between a master and his dog are religious, and many other animals must certainly regard the mysterious and often hostile strength of man as god-like power."[1]

Animism comprehends the doctrine of souls. The knowledge of the existence of a human soul was afterwards transferred to all other objects also. Animals have their own souls, which the savage represents to himself as like the soul of man. A belief that the whole nature is endowed with life is closely connected with these views, and mythology has borrowed this idea from animism.

In simple words, we can define religion as a belief in superhuman powers combined with their worship. In the words of De La Saussaye[2] :

1. Manual of the Science of Religion, p. 14.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

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"Religion has in reality but one object, the living God who manifests himself among all nations as the only real God. Though by many He is but partially known, or not known at all, because divine honour is paid to His works and His powers rather than Himself, yet in the end all worship is meant for Him, and man cannot conceive anything divine that is not really derived from Him."

This is why, the ancient thinkers in India had often had to look upon the many gods as manifestations of the one divine power.

Sacred stones, trees and animals occupied an important place in the primitive religion of India. Amongst religious conceptions there is hardly anyone as many-sided as that of animal worship. The worship of the animals arose independently from that of the god, but has got fused with it. The Greeks regarded animals merely as dedicated to the gods, while the Egyptians regarded them actually divine.

The impressions which man receives from the animals are deep. Both possess a common principle of life, and the consciousness of this relationship explains the sympathy and the antipathy which man feels towards animals. "The combination of ancestors with animals is very general, which Spencer explains by the fact that various animals, more especially snakes, creep round graves or dwell near them. It is a fact that the belief in animal humanity and human animality is widely spread."

A list of animals forming the object of worship would embrace all kinds of animals. To some great power is attributed, and to others only a limited sphere of activity. Germans paid great honour to goats, bulls and horses. Amongst the northern races of Europe, Asia and America, we must mention the bear. Indus people regarded bulls as most sacred while the Vedic Āryans had the greatest respect for the cow. But no animal is so important and so widely spread as the serpent, which is either religiously worshipped or feared all over the world, except in certain cold countries where it is not found. Serpent worship is quite common among the Negroes of Africa and of America. It is popular in the civilized races of Mexico and Peru. In Greece and Rome the traces of serpent worship have not quite disappeared from the official cult. In

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India, the importance of serpent worship can never be exaggerated.

It is an interesting point to note that serpents sometimes appear as antagonistic powers opposed to the gods, sometimes as friendly protecting spirits. We meet with the former in the example of Ṛgvedic Vritra. On the other hand, in the Greek worship of Asklepios, the serpent is the symbol of recovery and growth. In Germanic popular belief it is a protecting house-spirit. In Genesis, it is called a wise animal. The mantic importance of the serpent is widely spread.

ANIMALS ON THE HARAPPA SEALS

More than a thousand seals found in Harappa culture occupy an important place in Indus Valley art. The seals were a mass-produced commodity, "little masterpieces of controlled realism, with a monumental strength, in one sense out of all proportion to their size and in another entirely related to it, their average attainment being exceedingly high."[3]

The engraved designs on the seals include a wide range of animals with some pictographic signs. An ox-like animal with a single horn, is depicted on the majority of seals. Other animals are buffalo, rhinoceros, tiger, elephant, hare, antelope, eagle and crocodile, etc. On some seals mythological creatures have been found. One seal represents a human figure with hoofs, horns and tail of a bison, struggling with a tiger-like animal. On another seal is a composite animal, which appears to be a ram with the horns of a bull, a human face and the trunk and tusk of an elephant. The three-headed beast on another seal appears to be composite of three animals, head and horns of an antelope and body of a unicorn. It is very interesting to find that on some seals a file of animals is moving showing the unicorn, rhinoceros, crocodile, short-horned bull, elephant and tiger. In the words of V.S. Agrawala[4] :

"This motif was very common on the older seals of Mesopotamia and Susa, but there the animals marching

3. *Wheeler* : The Indus Civilization, p. 76.
4. Indian Art, pp. 37-38.

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in row are lions and antelopes."

Animals on the Indus Valley seals show the importance which was paid to them. But the most surprising thing in this connection is that no seal of Harappa culture contains the figure of a serpent. Crocodile is there but the serpent is missing. Of course, both belong to the family of reptiles.

SERPENT WORSHIP IN THE VEDIC PERIOD

The Ṛgveda reflects the life of Āryans living in Punjāb. Griswold[5] observes, "The most striking features of their home were the mountains on the north and the five rivers which rising in the mountain flowed downward through the land." The Ṛgveda is dominated throughout by the antethesis between Āryans and Dasyus. There is plenty of evidence in the Ṛgveda that the Āryan tribes not only fought against the Dasyus, but also were frequently at war among themselves.

The great difference between Ārya and Dasyu was religious. The following hymn makes it clear :

> Who is no-man, who loves nor god
> Nor sacrifice nor Āryan law,
> Him let his friend the mountain hurl to speedy death
> The Mountain hurl the Dasyu down.
>
> (*VIII, 70, 11.*)

The outstanding points of difference were race, colour and religion. For the Āryan the conception of the divine fatherhood was embodied in the idea of Father Sky, but for the Dasyu the same conception was expressed in the form of Liṅga-worship. In the words of Griswold,[6] "Śiśindeva is a term of reproach and contempt in the Ṛgveda. But the time came in India, when this worship became widespread even among the Brāhmaṇas. The despised Dasyus had thus their revenge." There is a view that serpent worship was adopted by the Āryans from the Dasyus. Supporters of this view assert that in the Ṛgveda, the earliest of the four Vedas, no reference to serpent worship is made. Oldenberg rightly rejects this theory

5. The Religion of the Ṛgveda, p. 1.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

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by observing that the Ṛgveda Saṁhitā is a collection of some thousand hymns from which it is impossible to derive a complete idea of the civilization of those days.

Ṛgvedic people found themselves in an environment partly helpful and partly perilous. The friendly objects and forces were sunshine, rain, fire, dawn, rivers, some animals and trees, etc. The hostile forces were drought, darkness, disease and death. In the words of Griswold[7] :

> "All nature thus divided into friendly and hostile forces was regarded as an aggregate of animated entities. This attitude of mind towards its environment began undoubtedly with the very first manifestation of the religious consciousness in the dim pre-historic past, and extended down far beyond the Vedic age."

The experience of harmful and helpful powers was gradually made more articulate through the interpretation of the powers of nature as animals or as men.

Among reptiles the most dreaded was the Ahi or serpent in whose form Vritra, the arch enemy of Indra, was conceived. The Nāgas were powers of the subterranean world but also elevated to the rank of Devatās. V.S. Agrawala[8] observes, "They typify the principle of Death, Darkness and Untruth, as against the Devas symbolising Immortality, Light and Truth." We find in the Ṛgveda that the serpent Vritra, the genius of evil, was vanquished by Indra.

Indra is celebrated in not less than two hundred and fifty hymns of the Ṛgveda. This shows that he was a favourite deity in the Ṛgvedic period. In the words of Griswold,[9] "Indra is perhaps the most completely anthropomorphised of all the Vedic deities." His most notable achievement is the slaying of Vritra and the release of the imprisoned waters. The following hymn of the Ṛgveda makes it clear :

> Lightning and thunder profited him nothing,
> Nor mist nor hailstorm which he spread around him;
> When Indra and the serpent fought their battle,

7. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
8. Indian Art, p. 48.
9. The Religion of the Ṛgveda, p. 177.

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Maghavan won the victory for ever.

Indra's powers are constantly dwelt on in the hymns addressed to him. Neither gods nor men have attained to the limit of his might.[10] Maruts always help him in his warlike exploits. Viṣṇu is a faithful friend of Indra and helps him in his conflict with Vritra.

Fergusson[11] holds:

> ".....we shall of course look in vain in the Vedas or any of the earlier writings in Sanskrit, for any trace of serpent worship. Not only was it repugnant to their own feelings, but they so utterly despised the Dasyus or by whatever other name they chose to designate the aborigines—that they would not even condescend to notice their superstitions."

Hymns of the Ṛgveda may be silent over serpent worship but Yajurveda and especially Atharvaveda definitely mention it. The same is true of later Vedic literature. In this connection, it should be noted that the mythic serpent-kings bear personal names which are purely Āryan. The very word Nāga, by which the serpent demon is indicated is Indo-Germanic in its origin. In fact the peculiar features and the deadly poison of certain serpents causes the whole species to be looked upon as demoniacal beings. Here lies the cause of its worship. In the words of Bothlink, "Even a great man is not worshipped as long as he has not caused some calamity; men worship the Nāgas, but not the Garuḍa, the slayer of the Nāgas." So we can safely assume that Indian ophiolatry had its first cause in the dread inspired by the poisonous serpents. Yajurveda pays homage to the serpents:

> "Homage be to the snakes whichsoever move along the earth. Which are in the sky and in heaven, homage be to those snakes, which are the arrows of sorcerers and of tree-spirits, and which lie in holes, homage be to those snakes, which are in the brightness of heaven, which are in the rays of the sun, which have made their abodes in the waters, homage be to those snakes."[12]

10. Ṛgveda, I, 100. 15.
11. Tree and Serpent Worship, p. 58.
12. Maitrayani-Saṁhita, II. 7, 15.

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Atharvaveda contains numerous interesting references regarding serpents. It is a well known fact that this Veda consists largely of magical spells. Many of them are charms resorted to avert the danger of snakes. To quote the Atharvaveda :

"Let not the snake, O gods, slay us with our offspring, with our men; what is shut together may it not unclose: what is open may it not shut together; homage to the god-people.

Homage be to Asita, homage to Tiraśchirāji, homage to Svaja (and) Babhru, homage to the god-people.

I smite thy teeth together with tooth, thy (two) jaws together with jaw, thy tongue together with tongue, thy mouth, O mouth, O snake, with mouth."

(*Atharvaveda-VI. 56.*)

The four terms Asita, Tiraśchirāji, Svaja and Babhru which occur in verse two, are commonly explained as denoting certain extant species of snakes. Vogel is of the view that these are the personal names of snake-demons which are associated with the four quarters of the sky. In the Atharvaveda, such a group of four is often invoked, although under different names. The two hymns of Atharvaveda (*III, 26, 27.*) clearly indicate that the four serpents mentioned under different names are connected with the four quarters. Both these hymns contain a homage to the gods of the quarters, but it is significant that the first of the two is also used as serpent-incantation. Ralph Griffith is right in explaining this hymn as a magical formula to win the favours of serpents of all the regions under heaven. Vogel[13] observes:

"We may surmise that the idea of four or six dragons guarding the corners of the world is more primitive than that of anthropomorphic of Lokapālas. Quite possibly both the systems of the guardian-gods and that of the elephants of the quarters are ultimately derived from the notion of the dragons of the sky which must have been still alive in the early period when the hymns of the Atharvaveda were composed."

In this connection we may mention a hymn of the Black

13. Indian Serpent Lore, p. 9.

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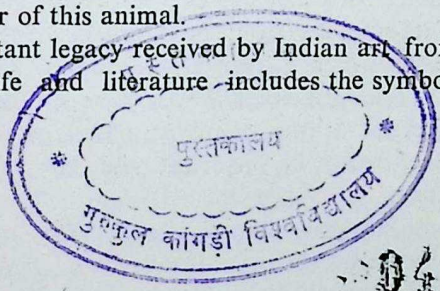
Yajurveda in which the six regions are associated with six divine regents and with an equal number of dragons, the names of which are identical with those of Atharvaveda, (*III. 27.*). In the charm from the Atharvaveda (*VI. 56*), the serpents are twice invoked under the name of devajana. Elsewhere, they are named with Gandharvas, Devas and Yakṣas, etc.

The Gṛhyasutras contain an account of the 'Sarpabali', which has the two-fold purpose of honouring and warding-off the serpents. The whole observance takes no less than four months. It is started on the full moon of Śrāvaṇa and concluded on the full moon of Mārgaśirṣa. During this period, people sleep on bed steads raised from the ground in order to protect themselves from the dangerous animal. This custom was duly noted by Nearchos. In course of this rite certain number of verses are to be recited. In Gṛhyasutras, the divine snakes are divided into three groups pertaining to earth, sky and heaven.

We can clearly see that the serpent rite is prescribed in the rainy season. It is during this period that the serpents, driven out of their holes by water, seek refuge in the dwellings of men. At this time the danger from the serpents is greatest. Vogel[14] questions, "Does not this observation also help us to understand the close relationship which popular b elief has established between the snake and the water?" The fact that snakes regularly appear at the commencement of the rainy season, it could be easily concluded that the advent of the rains was due to the magical power of this animal.

An important legacy received by Indian art from its Vedic sources of life and literature includes the symbol of serpents also.



14. Indian Serpent Lore, p. 11.

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4

Serpent Worship in the Great Epic

Mahābhārata is one of the two great epics of ancient India. Its main story relates to the contest between the Kaurvas and Paṇḍavas, ending in the victory of the latter. In the words of Goldstucker[1], the Mahābhārata says of itself, "There is no narrative on earth that is not found on this epos... The twice-born, though knowing the four Vedas and their supplementary sciences, has no wisdom unless he knows this great epos... It is the great manual of all that is moral, useful and agreeable" From the present shape of the Mahābhārata, it appears that this huge composition is not the work of a single individual, but a production of successive ages. It is clear from the multi-fariousness of its contents, from the difference of style and from the contradictions which disturb its harmony. Our tradition ascribes it to Vyāsa but actually Vyāsa means, "the agganger". As the same person is the compiler of the Vedas, Purāṇas and several other works, no historical value can be assigned to this generic name.

There is a strong view that this epic was compiled in its present form long after the event it describes. Fergusson is of the view that Rāmāyaṇa represents comparatively a pure Āryan society, but the heroes of Mahābhārata were much less pure a race. In the words of Fergusson[2], "Their origin, their polyan-

1. Sanskrit and Culture, p. 151.
2. Tree and Serpent Worship, p. 58.

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dry, and other peculiarities, all point to the Himālayas, and from this work, consequently, we may expect some light on serpent worship." The opening book of the Mahābhārata (Ādiparva) is very rich in myths relating to the Nāgas.

ORIGIN OF NĀGAS

Kadru and Vinatā were beautiful daughters of Prajāpati. Their husband was the great sage Kaśyapa. In his contentment, he granted each of them a boon. Kadru chose that she might become the mother of a thousand of Nāgas of equal splendour. Vinatā asked for two sons more powerful than those of her sister. In course of time Kadru became the mother of one thousand Nāgas, who were the progenitors of the whole serpent race. The name of her principal descendants are Śeṣa, Vāsuki, Aairāvata, Takṣaka, Kārkotaka, Kālia, Aila, Nila, Anila, Nahuṣa and others. Vinatā became the mother of Aruṇa and Garuḍa. Aruṇa became the charioteer of the Sun-god and Garuḍa the all-powerful enemy of the Nāga race. It is said that as soon as the Garuḍa was born, leaving his mother, he flew up in the sky to seize the food which had been ordained for him by the creator.

The Swedish scholar, J. Charpentier arrives at the conclusion that the story of Kadru and Vinatā must originally have been an ancient animal saga, in which the chief actors were the snake and the eagle, or more correctly the mother of snakes and mother of eagles who were identified with earth and heaven. These two laid a wager as to which of them could see farthest. If that is so, it may be considered as the earliest specimen of an animal saga preserved in the world's literature.

It is a fact that in one respect, the Garuḍa of nature agrees with the Garuḍa of legend. It is the deadly enemy of the snakes. Abbe Dubois says, "It wages perpetual war upon lizards, rats, and especially snakes. When it espises one of the last named, it swoops down upon it, seizes it in its talons, carries it up to an enormous height, and then lets it drop. Following swiftly, it picks it up again, killed, of course, by its fall, and flies off with it to some neighbouring tree where it may be devoured at leisure." The enmity between the Garuḍa and

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the serpents has provided an inexhaustible theme for Indian story upto the present day.

SERPENT AND THE GARUḌA

In the living Indian tradition, the classical antagonist of the serpents is the fabulous Garuḍa. The goblet of king Gudea of Lagash displays a warlike pair of winged birdlike monsters, standing erect on eagle claws and with the fore-paws of a lion. H. Zimmer[3] observes:

> "Such bird-beings represent the firmament—the upper, celestial, ethereal, realm—just as the serpent represents the life-bestowing, fertilizing element of the terrestrial waters. They stand in eternal opposition to the serpent powers and, accordingly, constitute with them an archetypal pair of symbolical antagonists, the champions respectively of heaven and of earth."

In the Greek mythology serpents attend the goddess Hera, Zeus consort. According to Homer's Iliad, an eagle appeared to the assembled Greek heroes during the seize of Troy. The bird was bearing in its talons a bleeding serpent. Kalchas, the priest-soothsayer interpreted it as an auspicious sign indicating the triumph of the Greeks over the Trojans. "The heavenly bird ravaging the serpent symbolized to him the victory of the patriarchal, masculine over the female principle of Asia and Troy."[4]

The twofold symbol of eagle and serpent possessed of a vitality that outlasts the ages. Probably, the symbolism is much more older than the goblet of the ancient Sumerian king. H. Zimmer is of the view that Mesopotamian Sumer may well have been the cradle out of which this symbolism made its way on one hand to Greece and on the other hand into ancient India. Is it not possible that the ancient India might have been the cradle, out of which this formula went westward to Mesopotamia and Greece? It appears that the eagle represents a spiritual principle of the release from the bondage of matter.

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3. Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization, p. 73.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

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On the other hand the serpent's life-force is the sphere of life-matter. In western tradition the spiritual antagonism of bird and serpent is commonly understood. But the opposition, as symbolized in India, is strictly that of the natural elements: sun force against the liquid energy of the earthly waters.

The word Garuḍa is derived from the root 'gri', which means "to swallow". As the annihilator of serpents, he is supposed to possess a mystic power against the effects of poison. Hence, he is popular in Indian folklore and worship. At Puri, persons suffering from snake-bite are taken to the main hall of the Great Temple, where they embrace a Garuḍa pillar. Garuḍa is represented, generally with wings, human arms, vulture legs, and a curved, beaklike nose. Two interesting examples are represented on the end piece of a balustrade from Siam: in a triumphant attitude above a pair of giant snakes with lifted heads, the sturdy little guards clutch their conquered victims in their claws.

In Indian tradition Garuḍa is the vāhana of Viṣṇu. In Cambodian architecture the whole Viṣṇu temple is supported by Garuḍa. The temple is regarded as an earthly copy of Vaikuṇṭha. In Indian mythology Lord Viṣṇu is linked with both the eternal antagonists. He rests on the Śeṣanāga and rides on the Garuḍa. Does it not indicate that there is some inherent unity in the spiritual and material life? This question is still open for research.

THE MYTH OF ŚEṢA

Śeṣanāga was the eldest among the children of Kadru. He detached himself from his family and sought refuge in penance. Seeing the austerities of Śeṣanāga Brahmā appeared before him and asked him to choose a boon. Then Śeṣanāga said:

> "This is the boon which I choose, O grandfather, May mind ever delight in righteousness, tranquillity and asceticism."

Brahmā said:

> "I am pleased, Śeṣa, with thy self-control and peace of mind. But act thou according to my word for the welfare of all creatures. This movable Earth with her rocks and woods, with her seas, villages, groves and towns, hold her firmly, O Śeṣa, so that she may be immovable."

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Śeṣanāga gave his consent to it. The Earth made him an opening which he entered, in order to support her from beneath. From that time onwards, Śeṣanāga at the command of Brahmā carries the sea-girdled Earth on his head.

THE SERPENT SACRIFICE

When king Janamejaya learnt about the ghastly tale of his father's death, he decided to take revenge upon Takṣaka and his tribe. After consulting his priests, he started celebrating a serpent sacrifice. Compelled by the powerful spell, the serpents hurled themselves into the blazing flames. In hundreds and thousands they were drawn towards the fire, in which they found a certain death.

Now Takṣaka took shelter in the abode of Indra and dwelt there joyfully. But the serpent king Vāsuki was very sad, when he saw his retinue steadily waning. Vāsuki's sister's son was destined to save the serpent tribe from destruction. His name was Āstika. Jaratkāru, the sister of Vāsuki, summoned her son and told him to save the Nāgas from dire destruction. Āstika went to his maternal uncle and assured him of his help. After comforting Vāsuki, Āstika reached the place of Janamejaya's sacrifice. But he was checked there by the doorkeepers. Āstika lauded the king, the sacrificing priests and the other Brāhmaṇas who were present there. Last of all he praised the Agni. Janamejaya was so much impressed by this young boy that he wanted to give him a boon. But the sacrificing priests asserted that the Brāhmaṇa boy shall be honoured, yet first of all Takṣaka must be compelled to approach the fire. They informed the king that Takṣaka had sought shelter in the abode of Indra. Now Janamejaya urged them to cause not only Takṣaka but Indra himself to fall in the sacrificial fire. The priests used their most powerful charms. So Indra had to go to the place of sacrifice. Takṣaka had concealed himself within the folds of Indra's mantle. Indra, seeing the holocaust, was seized by terror and leaving Takṣaka to his fate, he went back to his celestial abode.

Now the king Janamejaya, deeming his aim fulfilled asked Āstika to choose his boon. When Takṣaka was about to fall in

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the sacrifice fire, Āstika requested the king to stop the sacrifice. The king in vain persuaded Āstika to choose some other boon. Thus Takṣaka was saved. Āstika was granted a boon by the Nāgas that the recital of his story shall free men from the danger of serpents.

KṚṢṆA AND THE KĀLIYA NĀGA

There was a deep place in river Yamunā where Kāliya Nāga had taken up his abode. He had defiled the whole river and no one could dare to go near it. Lord Kṛṣṇa decided to punish this dreadful serpent. One day he ascended to the top of a Kadam tree and from there threw himself into the middle of the pool. The serpents caught Kṛṣṇa in their coils and bit him with their sharp fangs. But all was in vain. Kṛṣṇa did not die. Ultimately he subdued the monster and danced on its head. Lord Kṛṣṇa ordered Kāliya Nāga and his family to leave the waters of Yamunā and seek shelter in the ocean.

The spot on the river bank of Kṛṣṇa's victory is still pointed out at Mathurā. It is known as Kāliamardana Ghāt. Every year in the month of Kārtika, Nāga Lila is celebrated there with a procession of boats.

One of the Raths of Māmallapuram, depicts a two armed male figure defeating a three-headed Nāga. Metal images of Kāliyamardana-Kṛṣṇa are quite common in South India.

AKRURA EPISODE

An important example of serpent worship is provided by the Akrura episode. Akrura was paternal uncle of Kṛṣṇa. Once Kaṁsa, the cruel king of Mathurā deputed Akrura to the cowherds of Braj with the order that they should bring the annual tax in kind due to the king. In fact the mission of Kaṁsa was to kill his nephews, Kṛṣṇa and Baladeva.

After collecting the customary tribute Kṛṣṇa and Baladeva went too mounted on the same chariot as their uncle Akrura. When they reached the bank of Yamunā, Akrura spoke to his nephew Kṛṣṇa:

"In this pool of Yamunā, I will worship the lord of snakes by means of divine Mantras; for he is the sovereign of

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the whole world. I will bow down to the mysterious deity who is the cause of the universe, and whose head is adorned with the blessed *svāstika* cross, the thousand-headed snake Ananta, clad in a dark blue garment, who is a devotee of Viṣṇu."

Now Akrura dived down in the pool of Yamunā and went to the world of serpents. There he saw the thousand-headed lord of the serpents who carried a plough in one hand and whose frame was supported by a mace. He was being worshipped by the chief among the Nāgas, headed by Vāsuki.

FERGUSSON'S THEORY

In the words of Fergusson[5], "when divested, however, of its poetic garb, and all its mythological rubbish, the story of Mahābhārata, in so far at least as serpent worship is concerned, does not seem difficult to understand..." According to him the first transaction in which the Nāgas appear, is the burning of Khāṇḍava Vana. There the Nāgas were attacked by the Vedic god Agni but were protected by the Buddhist deity Indra. The Brāhmaṇa poet represents them as all perishing except their king Takṣaka. After this event the relations between the Paṇḍus and the Nāgas seem to have been of most friendly nature. Arjuna, in his first banishment marries Ulpi, the daughter of a Nāga king. His another wife Chitrāṅgadā was also the daughter of a Nāga king of Manipur. Fergusson is of the view that from these and other minor particulars it appears that the author of the Mahābhārata wished to represent the Āryans of that day as cultivating friendship with the aborigines. But the quarrel took place some time after the great war. Parikṣit was killed by Takṣaka. It was to take revenge that Janamejaya the son of Parikṣit performed the great sacrifice for the destruction of the Nāgas. We have narrated it earlier how the slaughter was stayed at the intervention of Āstika.

5. Tree and Serpent Worship, p. 59.

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5

Serpent Worship in Buddhism

In the words of James Fergusson[1], "From the earliest dawn of tradition to the present day the great underlying stratum of the population of India seem to have been of Turanian race, very unwarlike, and incapable of any rise in civilization, except through admixture of blood." What is the basis of this hypothesis is best known to Fergusson only. At least known history does not afford any proof for it. Fergusson further holds that Buddhism was little more than a revival of the coarser superstitions of the aboriginal races, purified and refined by the application of Āryan morality, and elevated by doctrines borrowed from the intellectual superiority of the Āryan race. We must note here that Buddha himself belonged to the pure Āryan race. In fact Buddha never introduced a new religion. What he wanted was to mitigate the sufferings of the common man by introducing certain dynamic changes in the existing church.

In the legends relating to the life of Śākya Muni, serpents play an important part. Here they are essentially different from that presented by the Great Epic. Serpent-demons are generally represented as devout worshippers of Buddha. Nāgas are easily won by his word.

One of the earliest serpent stories preserved in Buddhist scripture relates to the struggle between the Buddha and the

1. Tree and Serpent Worship, pp. 61-62.

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Nāga. The fight ensued throughout the whole night, and at last the serpent was caught in Buddha's alms bowl. There is another story of Muchilinda, the Nāga king, who sheltered Buddha during seven days against rain and winds spreading his hood over the Master's head.

Vinaypiṭaka related a curious story about a Nāga who assumed human shape and was ordained as a Buddhist monk, in order to be released from his serpent-birth. But his true nature was disclosed in his sleep. So the unfortunate Nāga was expelled from the monastery by the Buddha himself. This legend makes it clear that Nāgas were inferior and degenerate being, whose snake birth is a consequence of his evil deeds.

From Buddha's birth to his Nirvāṇa, Nāgas show him their reverence. Lalitvistāra tells us that, when queen Māyā Devi had given birth to the future Buddha, there appeared two Nāgarājas, Nanda and Upananda, who standing in the air and producing two streams of water cold and warm bathed the Bodhisattva. When the moment of Great Renunciation came, various deities declared their intention of assisting the future Buddha in his great undertaking. The Nāgarājas—Varuṇa, Manasvin Sāgara, Anavatapta, Nanda and Upananda spoke, "And we in order to do homage to the Bodhisattva will produce a cloud of benzoin and we will shower a rain of sandal powder which is the essence of snakes".

The Bodhisattva's progress from the river Niranjanā towards the sacred tree is described as a triumphal march in which a host of heavenly beings accompany him. The Nāgarāja Kala also comes forth and in a hymn of praise foretells his approaching enlightenment.

THE NĀGARĀJA ELĀPATTRA QUESTIONS THE BUDDHA

This story is chiefly known from the Tibetan and Chinese sources. According to the Chinese version there is a dialogue between the Buddha and the Nāgarāja Elāpattra. The Nāga asks how he might be reborn as a Deva or as a man. Being instructed by the Master in the Law, Elāpattra began to weep, and Buddha asked him why he did so. Elāpattra replied:

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"I remember in the days gone by, that I was a follower of Kāśyapa Buddha, and because I destroyed a tree called 'Ila', I was born in my present shape, and was called Elāpattra. Kāśyapa told me that after an indefinite period when 'Śākya Buddha' came into the world, that I should again receive a human shape, and so by becoming a disciple obtain final deliverance, and it is for this reason I weep."

Then Elāpattra having taken refuge in the Buddha, the Law and the Church departed.

When Fa-Hien visited the Deer Park of Banāras, he saw that spot where Elāpattra had asked Buddha, "When shall I be free from this Nāga body?"

BUDDHA SUBDUED THE FIERY DRAGON

After his first sermon in the Dear Park, Lord Buddha returned to Urvilvā. There he stayed in the hermitage of Urvilvā Kāśyapa. He spent his night in the room where the sacred fire was kept. There was a serpent king of great magical power. The Nāga seeing that the Lord had entered, became furious and sent forth a cloud of smoke. Fight ensued throughout the whole night. At the end, the Lord leaving intact the skin and flesh and bones that Nāga defeated him and threw him into his alms-bowl. The victory of Buddha over the wicked Nāga in the fire-hut is depicted in a well-known bas-relief of the eastern gateway of Sāñchi. In the art of Amarāvati, the episode is rendered in very much the same manner. Numerous examples of Buddha's victory over the Nāga of Urvilvā are met with among the Graeco-Buddhist sculptures of Gandhāra.

THE NĀGAS GET A SHARE OF THE BUDDHA'S RELICS

In the early Pāli text, it is related that Buddha died between the twin Sāl trees of Kuśinagara in the country of Mallas. After his body had been cremated, the rulers of neighbouring clans, sent messengers to claim part of the holy relics. With the approval of the Mallas of Kuśinagara, the Brāhmaṇa Droṇa

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divided the relics of Buddha into eight parts. They were given to the rulers of the various clans, and each of them raised a Stūpa in his own place.

A later tradition holds that not only the human worshippers of the Buddha, but also the Devas and the Nägas which had served him with full devotion, obtained part of his relic. This was a source of great sorrow to the kings of men.

The Stūpa worshipped by the Nāgas is a very favourite subject in the art of Amarāvati. Sometimes the entrance is guarded by a five-headed snake. But instances of more elaborate treatment are not wanting. On a well carved slab we see a Stūpa guarded by Nāgas in animal form. Thus we see a very close association of the Nāgas with the Master from his birth to Nirvāṇa. But it is difficult to explain serpent worship at this stage. Fergusson holds that as a part of reform which Buddha introduced, ancestral worship was abolished, and the sepulchral tumulus became the depository of relics of saints; serpent worship was repressed and its sister faith of tree-worship elevated to the first rank. In Aśoka's inscription we have no trace of either Buddha himself, nor of trees nor serpents.

Immediately preceding the Christian era a great revolution took place in Buddhism under the influence of Nāgārjuna. We know it for certain that Nāgārjuna was the ruling spirit in the Great Council held under Kaniṣka. At this time Buddhism was torn by internal dissensions. Nāgārjuna proclaimed himself the restorer of the old faith. "According to this prophet the words uttered by Śākya Muni during his life time had been heard and noted down by the Nāgas, who had kept them to themselves in their own abode, till such time as mankind should become worthy to receive them." Nāgārjuna announced that he had received these documents from the Nāgas and was commissioned to proclaim to them to the world. This gave rise to a new school of Buddhism known as Mahāyāna. From this stage, Nāgas occupy a respected position in Buddhism. The gateways at Sāñchi are nearly contemporary with Nāgārjuna. Buddha never appears on them as object of worship. The Dagoba, the Chakra, the tree and other such emblems are re verenced. The serpents do appear but rarely. At Amarāvati, Buddha is worshipped, but the Nāga is his co-equal.

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THE NĀGAS IN THE JĀTAKAS

The Pāli birth stories relating to the previous existence of the Buddha yield a rich harvest of Nāga lore. Here too the serpent-demons appear under varying aspects. As a rule the Nāga of the Jātakas is a harmless creature. The hereditary enmity between the Nāga and the Garuḍa is often brought in. The Uraga-Jātaka supplies us a story in which a holy hermit brings about reconciliation between a Nāga and a Garuḍa. The hermit was no other than the future Buddha.

The harmlessness of the Nāgas is mostly conceived as being self-chosen virtue. It is the outcome of their spiritual striving. We are told that the great Nāga kings, like Bhuridatta, Champaka and Śaṅkhapāla could annihilate a whole town, but they renounce the use of their power to harm. They prefer to close their eyes when they see the wicked snake-charmer drawing near to capture them.

Thus in the Jātaka stories which are really Buddhistic in spirit, we meet with those pious Nāgas who realize the highest ideals of forbearance and self sacrifice. Champaka, Śaṅkhapāla and Bhuridatta are identified with the future Buddha. There are two Jātakas in which the Nāga is not identified with the future Buddha, but with one of his principal disciples. In the Mahāpaduma he is Ānanda and in the Silānisaṁsa he is a Śāriputra. In both these stories the serpent-king figures as the helpful deity who in each case saved the hero from disaster and death. At times the Nāgas assume the lofty office of a just deity saving those in danger and chastising the wicked. In some Jātakas Nāgas are described as guardians and distributors of wealth, including objects with magical properties. In the words of Vogel[2]:

> "But, on the whole, it must be admitted that under the influence of Buddhist ideals the character of the ancient serpent demons has become strangely altered and has acquired an ethical value which certainly it did not possess in a more primitive stage."

Now it is clear that the serpent-worship in Buddhism occupies an important place due to the following reasons :

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2. Indian Serpent Lore, p. 136.

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1. Nāgas are associated with Lord Buddha since his birth to Nirvāṇa.
2. Many times in his previous birth the Buddha had been a serpent.
3. Jātaka stories reveal the pious nature of the serpents.
4. At times the Nāgas assume the lofty office of a just deity saving those in danger and chastising the wicked.
5. In some Jātakas, Nāgas are described as guardians and distributors of wealth.

The above narrative fully illustrates the theme of serpent-worship in Buddhism. An important function of the Nāgas is that of "door guardian". As such they frequently appear at the portals of Buddhist shrine. In this role their proper attitude is of pious devotion.

Between the Buddha and the Nāga there is no such antagonism as we are used to in the saviour versus serpent symbolism of the west. In the words of H. Zimmer[3]:

> "According to the Buddhist view, all the genii of nature rejoice, together with the highest gods upon the appearance of incarnate redeemer, and the serpent, as the principal personification of the waters of terrestrial life, is no exception. Eager to serve the universal teacher, they watch solicitously his progress towards final enlightenment; for he has come to redeem all beings alike, the creatures of earth, of the heavens and of the hells."
>
> "There is a special Buddha-type that stresses this supreme harmony between the saviour who has overcome the bondage of nature and the serpent who represents that very bondage; the type figures conspicuously in the Buddhist art of Cambodia and Siam. Like the image of Viṣṇu on Ananta, this Buddha represents a special modification of a traditional Hindu Nāga formula."

The legend that explains it forms a part of the earliest Indian Buddhist tradition and is given a prominent place in the orthodox canon preserved by the venerable Buddhist community of Ceylon. It is based on the event which had occurred shortly after Buddha's enlightenment. In this legend and in the images of the Muchalinda-Buddha a perfect

3. **Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization, p. 66.**

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reconciliation of antagonistic principles is represented.

> "The serpent, symbolizing the life force that motivates birth and rebirth, and the saviour, conqueror of that blind will for life, severer of bonds of birth, pointer of the path to the imperishable transcendent, here together in harmonious union open to the eye a vista beyond all the dualities of thought."

Some of these Muchalinda-Buddhas of the Mon-Khmers rank among the very finest masterworks of Buddhist art.

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6

Serpent Worship After the Great Reformation

When Alexander was attacking some of the cities in India, he found in many of them a serpent which the Indians, regarding as sacred, kept in a cave and worshipped with much devotion. The Indians implored Alexander to let no one molest the animal, and he consented to this. When the army was marching past the cave, the serpents heard the sound that arose and hissed so loud that every one was terrified. It was said to be seventy cubits long. Its eyes were of the size of Macedonian shield.

Onesikratos, the master pilot of the Alexander says that the king of Abhisāra kept two serpents, one of which was 80 and other 140 cubits in length. Other Greek writers also inform that the Indians used to hunt serpents and rear them in caves. Nearchos expresses his surprise at the multitude and malignancy of the tribe of reptiles.

Aelian speaks of the herbs which serve as antidote against snake-bite and refers to the curious belief that a snake, if it kills a man, cannot creep into its underground home, the earth refusing to receive it and casting it out from her household. Aelian's narrative testified to the existence of real serpent worship in the Punjāb during the fourth century B.C In the words of Vogel, "Now whereas genuine ophiolatry prevails up to the present day in western and southern India, it

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is found in northern India only in the form of certain survivals....."

Besides the kings of Udyana, there were several other royal houses of ancient India which claimed a Nāga descent. The dynasty of Lalitāditya was asserted to descend from the Nāga Kārkota. The Rajas of Chhoṭa Nāgpur derived their origin from the Nāga Puṇḍarīka. Another instance of serpent origin is afforded by the ruling house of Manipur. Bastar is ruled by a Nāga dynasty. A certain caste of Kayasthas, belonging to Bengal, derive their origin from the Serpent King Vāsuki.

If we turn to South India, we find that the King Salivāhana of Praṭisṭhān was the son of the Nāga Ananta. Pallavas also claimed descent from a Nāga. M.J. Przyluski has pointed out that the story of the Nāgi ancestress is widely spread in the Far East. All these examples show the importance of Nāgas in early Indian tradition.

SERPENT WORSHIP IN PLASTIC AND PICTORIAL ART

The importance of the Nāgas in Buddhism and Bhrāhmaṇism is reflected in plastic and pictorial art. Sometimes the Nāgas are depicted as animal, sometimes as a human creature, but generally human and animal properties are strangely blended Of these three forms, the last mentioned is comparatively rare. It occurs in Brāhmaṇical sculpture, but in Buddhist art it is rarely employed. The simplest and most primitive form in which the Nāgas appear in Indian art is the serpent form. The divine serpents are many headed. The number is always uneven. It may be three, five or seven. In literature, five-headed serpent is often mentioned.

The central architrave of the eastern Toraṇa of Sāñchi bears a well-known relief representing the worship of a sacred tree by forest animals. Among the animals we notice a five-headed Nāga side by side with his natural enemy Garuḍa. On the same gateway we have the scene of Buddha subduing the serpent-dragon in the fire-hut of Urvilvā. The presence of Buddha is indicated by a symbol. The Nāga is a five-headed cobra.

Among the reliefs of Bharhut, we also meet with this Nāga type. A five-headed serpent is conversing with an ascetic who

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is seated in front of his hut. Among the archaic demi-gods who guard the gates of Bharhuta there is a Nāgarāja named Chakavāka, who is standing with his hands raised in adoration, which shows his devotion to the Buddha. The Nāgarāja bears a human shape but there is the five-fold snake-crest surmounting his head dress. Another Bharhut bas-relief, carved in the shape of a medallion, shows a Nāgarāja accompanied by two female chowrie-bearers.

The Prasenjit pillar of Bharhut is of special interest to us. Here Lord Buddha is being worshipped by the Nāgarāja Elāpattra. The presence of the Master is shown by an empty stone at the foot of a sacred tree. In the words of V.S. Agrawala, "Similar to Yakṣa and Śri Lakṣmi Devatā cults, the Nāgas also were accepted as an element in the religious form of the Stūpa. They are mentioned as the guardian deities." Amongst the five Rakṣa-Maṇḍalas of the Sudarśana city in Uttar Kuru visited by Māndhātā. There is one presided over by the Nāga chief emerging out of waters. On a pillar now in Allahabad Museum, in the central medallion is a banyan tree below which five-hooded Muchaliṇḍa Nāgarāja is sheltering an altar and the footprints of the Buddha. This story is depicted at Sāñchi, Amarāvati and Nāgarjunākoṇḍa Stūpas also. The Nāga King Chakravāka is carved on the corner pillar of the south gate.

MATHURĀ AS CENTRE OF NĀGA WORSHIP

There is a view that Mathurā must once have been a great centre of Nāga worship. A Sanskrit inscription preserved in the Lucknow Museum refers to a local serpent deity, named Dadhikaraṇa, who appears to have his own shrine not far from the Buddhist convent founded by Huviṣka.

Among the numerous Nāga images recovered in the Mathurā district the most valuable is the inscribed statue from Chhargaon. It is now preserved in the local museum. The Nāga is shown standing with his right arm raised over his head as if ready to strike. The left hand is broken. The head is surmounted by a seven-headed snake-hood. The well-preserved inscription incised on the back of the image reveals that it was set up at a water tank in the fortieth year of the Kuṣāṇa

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era during the reign of Huviṣka. Vogel holds :

"The Chhargaon statue represents the best and possibly one of the earliest specimens or a distinct class of Nāga images, of which numerous examples have come to light in the Mathurā district. These icons still receive the worship of the rural population, but under a different name; they are invariably designated as Dau-ji or Baldeo."

Modern images of Baldeo are nothing but imitations of the ancient Nāga figures. It is an important point to note here that Baldeo is believed to be an incarnation of Śeṣa.

Nāga images of Mathurā exhibit certain features which deserve our notice. The hood of serpent heads are usually seven in number. It assumes the appearance of a circular nimbus round the head of the deity. In Nāga images from Mathurā the hood forms part of a complete serpent whose coils are plainly visible both at the front and at the back of the sculpture.

The mode of rendering Nāga was current during the later phase of Indo-Buddhist art. A beautiful example of a seated Nāga was found on the site of Nālandā. This Nāga is sitting in an easy posture on the coils of a serpent. Hood of seven-headed cobra forms a canopy overshadowing him. This image has been identified with the Buddhist saint Nāgarjuna. It is an important point to note that according to Chinese pilgrims Nālandā was named after a Nāga. There is a view that Sārnāth and Sankisa were perhaps originally dedicated to serpent worship.

If we go back to the art of Amarāvati, we find that the snake-hood surrounds the head of the Nāga in nimbous-like manner. Here the treatment is more graceful than Mathurā. The Nāga figures which guard the entrance of the Buddhist shrine of Ceylon are derived from the anthropomorphic type of India proper. The earliest specimen at Anurādhāpur shows a close affinity to the Nāgas of Amarāvati.

GUPTA ART

A highly artistic treatment of the Nāga figure is met with in Gupta art. Ajantā shows a Nāgarāja, distinguished by a

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seven-fold snake-hood, sitting in an easy pose and attended by his consort. A female attendant is holding a fly-whisk. Among the famous frescoes of Ajantā, there are several representations of Nāgas, particularly in cave II. Here we see the Nāgas in all the three types described above. The third type in which the upper part of the body is human and the lower part is animal is extremely rare in Indo-Buddhist art. But it is quite common in Brāhmaṇical sculpture.

In the huge rock-carving of Māmallapuram, we see a couple of serpent-demons wearing a snake hood. More prominent are the Nāga and the Nāgi which occupy the cleft between the two rocks, and seem to rise from the Nether Regions. "They are excellent specimens of the iconographic type in which the man and the reptile are blended into a fantastic being of life-like appearance." This wonderful piece of sculpture belongs to Pallava art of seventh century of our era.

A fine example of the mermaid type occurs on a bas-relief placed in one of the niches of the well known temple of Deogarh in Jhāñsi district. The subject of this sculpture is Gajendra-mokṣa. The great animal, struggling in vain, implored the help of Viṣṇu which was granted to him. No deed of Viṣṇu is required, his presence is enough. The mighty serpent pays obeisance, together with his queen. In this classic Gupta art, the Garuḍa has something the appearance of an angel. Viṣṇu is crowned with a diadem, and has four arms.

A more developed myth is that of third incarnation of Viṣṇu. In the words of H. Zimmer, "In this case, the story of the conquest of the serpent force is integrated with the great cycle of universal evolution. The event is supposed to have occurred at the dawn of the present Kalpa, and is termed 'The Creation by the Boar'." This event is depicted in a relief of Udaigiri. The celestial beings are watching the exploit of the heroic boar. A third instance of Viṣṇu as conqueror of the serpent principle is recounted in his most popular incarnation of Kṛṣṇa. The tale is told in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa.

A beautiful relief in the temple of Deogarh displays Viṣṇu recumbent on the coils of Ananta. This work in the 'Gupta Style' is excellent. Here again Viṣṇu can be seen as the conqueror of the serpent principle.

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MEDIAEVAL ART

The type of the snake-tailed Nāga remains a favourite subject in mediaeval art, and is conspicuous on the temples of Orissa. The finest expression is found in the amorous Nāga couple. Some good examples may be seen in the Calcutta Museum. James Fergusson[1] observes :

> "...the most recent example I am acquainted with of any great Nāga sculpture belonging to the classical age of Indian art, is the well-known bas-relief at Mahavellipore, on the eastern shore, about forty miles of Madras, and executed apparently in the thirteenth century."

HINDU RELIGION

Hindu religion may be divided into two classes, that of Śiva and that of Viṣṇu. It is true that Śiva is occasionally represented holding a Nāga in his hand. Sometimes serpents are twisted round his neck, but in all these instances, the serpent is not an object of worship. But the association of the Nāga with Lord Śiva makes him venerable. In some southern temples two serpents are seen erect with their head above the Lingam, on either side, as if worshipping it.

In Vaiṣṇavism, serpent always played an important part. The Nāga appears everywhere in Vaiṣṇava tradition. Viṣṇu reposes on the Śeṣa. It was by the assistance of Śeṣanāga that the ocean was churned and *Amrita* produced. He always spreads his protecting hood over Viṣṇu or his *avatāras* and in all instances it is seven-headed heavenly Nāga.

Nāga iconography stands parallel to that of the Yakṣas in popularity and antiquity. The Nāga images were mostly of human form with serpent coils and canopy of hoods added to them.

> "The drinking cup in the left and the abhaimudra of the right hand marked them out as full-fledged divinities. In earlier art their bodies half-emerging from the water indicate their origin in water cosmology, and later on they were installed near pools of water showing them as guardians of watery stores of the world. Their king

1. Tree and Serpent Worship, p. 68.

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Dhṛtarāṣṭra was one amongst the four lokapāla gods. Although the Nāga cult was the most ancient, even preceding that of the Yakṣa, their iconography was simple."

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7

The Principal Naga Kings

We meet with extensive lists of Nāgas in the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas. In the Ādi-Parvan, Sauti enumerates seventy-eight principal Nāgas. Sixty-eight names are inserted in the episode of Matali's visit to Bhogavati. The Harivaṁśa provides two catalogues of divine serpents, one of twenty-six and the other of eighteen names. Bhāgavata contains only fifteen names, whereas the Vāyu-Purāṇa contains forty-one. The Nilamata contains a most extensive list of five hundred names.

In the introductory portion of Sadharma-puṇḍarīka, Buddha is described seated in all his glory on the top of the vulture peak in the midst of divine beings. These include myriads of Nāgas, headed by eight Nāga chiefs: Nanda, Upananda, Sāgara, Vāsuki, Takṣaka, Manasvin, Anavatapta and Utpala. The Mahāvyutpati, a Buddhist vocabulary in Sanskrit supplies a list of eighty Nāga-kings and fifty-five common serpents. It is an interesting point to note that several Nāgarājas bear royal names. Examples are Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Dhananjaya, Āryaka, Janamejaya and Dilīpa, etc.

ŚEṢANĀGA

Śeṣa tops the list in epic literature. He is often praised as the sovereign of all serpents. In the Harivaṁśa where Brahmā appoints kings to rule over different classes of creatures, it is said, "He annointed Vāsuki king of the Nāgas, Takṣaka of the snakes, and Śeṣa of all fanged beings." This passage indicates a superior rank for Śeṣa the Ananta.

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Śeṣanāga is especially known as bearer of the earth. It was with the help of Śeṣanāga that Mount Mandara was used as a churning-stick to churn the ocean. Śeṣa has yet another important function. During his inactivity Viṣṇu is supposed to sleep in the ocean and to repose on the coils of Śeṣa. At last Brahmā, the creator, is born from a lotus rising from Viṣṇu's navel, and the supreme deity awakes from his sleep to renewed action. His first deed is the destruction of two demons, who threaten the new-born Brahmā. Viṣṇu 'resting on Śeṣa' is a popular theme of plastic art. An early example is found in one of the cave temples of Māmallapuram on the coast of Coromaṇḍal and which belong to seventh century of our era. Majestic figure of the god asleep on his serpent-bed is two armed and unadorned. His head is surrounded by Ananta's hood. The figure of Brahmā on his lotus is absent but at the lower end the two warlike demons stand in a defiant attitude.

Another notable instance is provided in the Gupta temple of Deogarh. This panel lacks the grand and simple style of Māmallapuram but the numerous figures depict that easy and varied grace which is peculiar to the best works of Gupta art. Here the sleeping Viṣṇu has four arms. Lakṣmi is caressing her husband's right foot. Four-faced Brahmā is seated on his lotus. Several other deities have been shown in the panel. Outside India we find Viṣṇu resting on Ananta in the Śiva temple of Prambanan on the island of Java. In the Prambanan sculpture, Viṣṇu is seated on the world-serpent. Such an Indian example is found in the colossal rock-cut image in the verandah of cave III at Bādāmi.

The Śeṣa is also associated with the third incarnation of Viṣṇu. The earliest known rendering of the Varāha *avatāra* in plastic art is the large rock-sculpture of Udayagiri which belong to the Gupta period. The Varāha, carrying the earth on his left shoulder, is shown treading with his left foot on the coils of the world-serpent. The upper portion of the Nāga consists of a human figure with folded hands. Two other early examples of this scene occur among the rock-carvings of Bādāmi and of Māmallapuram.

It is an important point to note that in the sculptures depicting the Varāha *avatāra* the serpent Śesa is rarely missing. Now it is well known that Baladeva, the elder brother of

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Kṛṣṇa is believed to be an incarnation of Śeṣa. A chapter from Harivaṁśa gives an extensive description of Baladeva-Śeṣa, in which the superman and the super-snake are curiously blended.

VĀSUKI

Vāsuki is regarded as the genius presiding over the nether world. In the list of the principal Nāgas found in the Mahābhārata and in the Purāṇas, Vāsuki usually figures second, immediately after Śeṣa. As the Śeṣa is absorbed in the duty of carrying the earth, it is Vāsuki who is the real sovereign of the serpent tribe. In Ādi-Parvan, Vāsuki presides over the communings of the Nāgas when they discuss means of escape from the cruel fate. Vāsuki bestows his sister Jaratkāru in marriage upon the like-named anchorite so that a saviour of his people may be born from their union.

In the final struggle between Arjuna and Karṇa, Vāsuki, Takṣaka as well as Maṇika and all the sons of Kadru were on the side of Arjuna and the inferior snakes on that of Karṇa. In the churning of the ocean, Śeṣa uproots Mount Mandara and Vāsuki works as a churning rope.

Vāsuki is often extolled as the lord of the Nāga-capital, Bhogavati. In the Rāmāyaṇa, when Sugrīva deputes an army of monkeys under Hanumān to the south, he refers about Vāsuki the very dreadful king of serpents. Mahābhārata also mentions a town Bhogavati, ruled by Vāsuki, by the Nāga Takṣaka and by Aairāvata.

Śeṣa is closely connected with Viṣṇu and Vāsuki with Śiva. The serpent king is supposed to be slung round Śiva's neck. In fairy tales, Vāsuki generally figures as the thousand-headed monarch of the serpents. In the legend of Jimūtavāhana it is Vāsuki who makes a pact with Garuḍa and promises to send him daily one Nāga for his food. In the Kathāsaritsāgar, we hear of a festival in honour of Vāsuki which was celebrated in the country of Lāta. We are not sure whether such a snake temple ever existed in Lāta, but up to the present time Vāsuki is worshipped in this part of India. A legend tells us that the foot of the Iron Pillar of Delhi was believed to rest on the head of Vāsuki

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and thereby to secure the stability of the kingdom. When the incredulous king had the pillar dug up, its base was found wet with the blood of the serpent Vāsuki and it could never again be firmly fixed. Soon after the Hindu kingdom of Delhi was conquered by the Muslims.

In the valleys of the Western Himālaya, Vāsuki under the name of Basak Nāga is extensively worshipped. The same is the case in Nepal. In the islands of Bali, Vāsuki is known as Nāga Bāsaki, and is reckoned among the attendants of the sea-god Baruṇa. The inhabitants of Java, too, must have worshipped this serpent king before being converted to Islam. "The town of Besuki situated on the northern coast of eastern Java seems still to retain the memory of his cult."

TAKṢAKA

Takṣaka is the chief Nāga hero during the serpent sacrifice of Janamejaya. He is the most typical, poisonous and fierce serpent-demon. Professor W. Hopkins says[1], "and his special glory show or indicate a historical character". Takṣaka is one of the few Nāgas whose name is mentioned in Vedic literature. Both in the Atharvaveda and in various Sutras he is called 'Takṣaka Vaiśāleya'. Few hymns of the Atharvaveda are addressed to Takṣaka. In the Kauśika-sutra, a bali is described for the protection of the house and to be offered to various deities, including not only Takṣaka but also his double, named Uptakṣaka. In the 'Institute of Viṣṇu' Takṣaka and Uptakṣaka are mentioned as recipients of food-offering.

In the Rāmāyaṇa it is often repeated that Rāvaṇa has vanished Vāsuki, conquered his town Bhogavati, and carried off the wife of Takṣaka. But the name of Takṣaka's consort is not mentioned. In one passage where Rāvaṇa's victory over the Nāgas is related, four chiefs of the serpent tribes are enumerated, namely Vāsuki, Takṣaka, Śaṅkha and Jatin. The town Bhogavati is here clearly located in the womb of the ocean.

Takṣaka's name occurs in the ancient hymn to the Nāgas, which is preserved in Pauṣya-Parvan. It appears that the

1. Epic Mythology, p. 29.

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original home of the cult of Takṣaka was Indraprastha, from where it was carried northward to Kurukṣetra. The city of Taxilā is supposed to be associated with Takṣaka. But in the course of excavation carried out by John Marshall on the site of Taxilā no evidence of local serpent worship has come to light.

It is an important point to note that the serpent-king of Pauṣya-Parvan possesses a shrine in Central India where he is worshipped down to the present day under the name of Takṣakeśvara. The shrine in question stands on a most romantic spot not far from the village Navali. It now forms part of the territory of Indore.

ELĀPATTRA

He is known by the name of Dhṛtarāṣṭra Airāvata. In a hymn of Atharvaveda (VIII, 10) Takṣaka Vaiṣāleya and Dhṛtarāṣṭra Airāvata are mentioned side by side as the chief representatives of the serpent race. It is worthy of note that Dhritrāṣṭra Airāvata never takes any active part in the numerous Nāga stories collected in the Mahābhārata. His name does occur in the Great Epic but he seems to be regarded as a remote ancestor of the Nāga race. The name Elāpattra has been recognized as a Prakrit form of the Sanskrit Airāvata. It appears that the compilers of the Mahābhārata were not aware of the identity of both names. Hence Elāpattra is mentioned as a separate Nāga in the list. After the serpent mother Kadru has pronounced her curse, Elāpattra figures here as the most wise Nāga, who knows what will happen in the future. It is an interesting point to observe that Elāpattra does not play a prominent part in the Brāhmaṇical tradition but he enters a remarkable career in the Buddhist tradition. It is said that Elāpattra had been born as a Nāga because in his previous birth he had destroyed an elā tree. The legend further relates that Elāpattra came from Taxilā to the Dear Park to pay respects to the Buddha.

The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang mentions Elāpattra among the three great Nāga kings who obtained a share of the Buddha's relics. On his way to Taxilā he saw that place

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which was supposed to be the abode of the Nāga. Alexander Cunningham has recognized the sacred tanks of Elāpattra in a small reservoir of clear water not far from Hasan Abdāl, about ten miles to the north-west of Shah Dheri. Although no longer associated with the Nāga king, the tank is still held in reverence by the Sikhs and the Muslims. From Hiuen-Tsang we learn, that Elāpattra was worshipped as a regent of the water and giver of rain. From his account it is clear that the tank of the Nāga Elāpattra was situated at some distance to the north-west of Taxilā.

KĀRKOṬAKA

He occupied an important place in the lists of principal Nāgas found in the epic literature. In the Musalaparvan he heads the band of Nāgas who came to meet Baldeo Śeṣa on his reassuming the divine state. In the Harivaṁśa Kārkoṭaka is especially mentioned. Kārkoṭaka figures in the far-famed tale of King Nala, in which he shows his gratitude to the hero of the story, who had saved him from fire. Great Lalitāditya of Kashmir, boasted the Nāga Kārkoṭaka as the procreator of its race. Kārkoṭaka is worshipped even today. He is stated to have a shrine at Barhā Kutrā in the Bānda district of Uttar Pradesh. In Nepal, Kārkoṭaka takes a prominent position in popular worship. He is regarded as the foremost Nāga of Nepal.

ŚAṄKHA

The word Śaṅkha as an appellative means a conch shell. We do not know much regarding the legends connected with Śaṅkha, but the place where he was worshipped can be fixed with a considerable degree of certainty. In the Divyāvadāna Śaṅkha is said to be the name of the future king whose family priest, Brahmāyu, will become the father of Maitreya, the Buddha to come. Mahāvaṣtu throws some light on the cult of serpent worship in ancient India. The text says, "There are four great treasures : Śaṅkha at Benares, Paduma at Mithilā, Pingala in Kalinga, and Elāpattra at Taxilā. At Benares there

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is a monthly assembly in honour of Śaṅkha. The Nāgarājas, who are the guardians of the treasures, being invited, repair thither." This passage acquaints us with the existence of the cult of the Nāga Śaṅkha at Benares at an early date. We would like to refer here to the modern Nāga worship of the Western Himālaya. Here the annual melā in honour of the Nāga is usually held in a grove surrounding the temple and the festivities culminate in the sacrifice of a goat or ram.

MAṆI

The word Maṇi, meaning a pearl, is often found in Nāga names. This name suggests a close connection with the sea, which is frequently described as an abode of the Nāgas. Nāga Maṇi is mentioned in two passages of Mahābhārata, which enlighten us regarding the locality of his cult. In the Sabhā-parvan, Kṛṣṇa says, "Maṇi hath made Magadha such that clouds cannot keep aloof from it ; Kauśika and Maṇimant, too, have shown it their favour."

The other reference to Maṇi is found in Vana-parvan. It is said, "Going thence to Maṇi-nāga, he will reap a benefit equal to a gift of a thousand kine. Whosoever partakes the water of the tirtha of Maṇi-nāga, had he been bitten even by a venomous snake, the poison will have no effect on him. By sojourning there during one night, he will reap a benefit equal to a gift of a thousand kine." It appears that the abode of the Nāga Maṇi was at Rājagṛha, the ancient capital of Magadha. During the cold season of 1905-06, Sir John Marshall and Dr. Bloch carried on excavation on the site of Rājagṛha. They found many figures of Nāgas all shown standing with the usual snake-hood. These images belong to the Gupta period.

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8

Nagas of Kashmir

RĀJATARANGIṆI

Among the later works of Sanskrit literature it occupies an important place. It is an important source for the study of ancient Kashmir and for Indian historical research. Prof. Buhler expressed his conclusion, "A new attempt to translate and to explain the Rājatarangiṇi and to use its contents for the history of India ought to be made."

Kalhaṇa completed his work in the year 1150 A.D. In the words of Vogel[1], "It is the last great work produced by Sanskrit literature during the Hindu period." Although this work was meant to be a poetic composition, but the author shows in it a remarkable historical sense. This is particularly correct as regards the last book of this work, in which Kalhaṇa describes the history of his own time. Previous books contain legendry lore.

From Kalhaṇa's chronicle it appears that the Nāgas were the popular deities in Kashmir. They were regarded water-spirits inhabiting lakes and springs and granted timely rain for the crops. When in anger they could cause hail-storms, heavy snow-fall and disastrous floods. Aurel Stein says:

"Considerable importance must have been attached to their worship, as is proved by the long account given of them in the Nilamata, by the numerous temples erected near

1. Indian Serpent Lore, p. 220.

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the more famous springs, and the popularity and undoubtedly ancient origin of the pilgrimages directed to the latter. The belief in the Nāgas is fully alive also in Muhammadan population of the valley, which in many places has not ceased to pay a kind of superstitious respect and ill-disguised worship to these deities. The popular conception of Nāgas, as now current, represents them under the form of snakes, living in water of the springs or lakes protected by them."

NILA

At the outset of his chronicle, Kalhaṇa tells us that the land of Kashmir has offered shelter to the Nāgas. Among these Nāgas he mentions Saṅkha and Paduma. The chief guardian of the valley is Nila whose abode is in the Nilakuṇḍa or the main source of Vitastā. Kalhaṇa relates that in the days of Abhimanyu I, the Buddhists, headed by Nāgārjuna, became all powerful and cut off the rites prescribed in the Nila Purāṇa. Now the Nāgas became furious and caused destruction of the people. There was such a huge snow fall that the king had to leave his place and reside in Darvābhisāra. The wicked Buddhists perished and a certain Brāhmaṇa Chandradeva practised austerities to propitiate Nila, the lord of the Nāgas. Nila revealed a new rite in his Purāṇa and removed the calamity. Nilamata next relates in what manner Kashmir became inhabited. Nilamata provides a great deal of information regarding Nāga-worship.

IṚĀMANJARI PUJĀ

An important festival in which Nila and Nāgas participate is celebrated in the month of Chaitra. It is called Iṛāmanjari pujā. Iṛā was an Apasarā, who was cursed by Indra and turned into a plant. This plant grows in the Himālayas. Nila says:

"The Iṛā is dear to the Nāgas and to me. She is dear in particular, therefore, it is by means of the Iṛā flower that a wise man must worship the Nāgas together with me.

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Whosever pray the worship into me with Iṛā flowers, with him I am pleased."

VARUṆA-PANCHAMI

At first sight it may look strange that Nilamata has no mention of Nāga-panchami, the great festival which is celebrated all over India. In fact Varuṇa-panchami described in the Nilamata is identical with Nāga-panchami. Varuṇa in his capacity of god of the ocean is regarded as the overlord of the Nāgas. Nilamata contains an extensive list of the Nāgas. It surpasses in length all lists from Sanskrit literature. It comprehends not less than 527 names.

We have said it earlier that Nila, the Lore paramount of the Nāgas dwells in the main source of Vitastā. Hence it is called Nilakuṇḍa. In his subterraneous palace the serpent king lives with royal pomp and show, which is described in the Nilamata. In later times the sacred fount of Nila became known by the name of Ver Nāga, which is derived from the district of Ver in which it is situated. This modern designation can be traced back to the reign of Akbar.

Nāga Ananta has given his name to the town or Anantanāga, situated at the foot of the western extremity of the plateau of Mārtaṇḍ. Up to the present day Takṣaka is worshipped in the large pool of limpid water at the village of Zevan. There is a belief that the saffron flowers have originated from the Nāga. Kalhaṇa speaks of the annual festival in honour of the great serpent king on the twelfth day of the waning moon of Jyeṣṭha. Takṣaka figures in the legend of the destruction of Narapur which is narrated by Kalhaṇa. The Nāga Kārkoṭaka must also have had his special tirtha. It must have been near the mountain-ridge or the Tosha Maidān road, which is now known as Kākodar. This name seems to have been derived from Kārkoṭaka.

Abul-Fazl, the great Prime Minister of Akbar, had collected interesting notes regarding the worship of the ancient spring spirits of the Kashmir valley. They clearly show how largely the Nāgas must have loomed in the imagination of the rural population. "The animal sacrifices, and the curious customs of

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divination associated with the sacred springs—all these various traits combined produce a faithful picture of this form of popular worship."

In the words of Sir Walter Lawrence, "It is dangerous to discuss so great a mystery as the Hindu religion, yet I cannot help noticing the important part which water springs and snakes play in the Kashmir mythology." If one has time to sit by a spring with the villagers, many interesting legends may be heard, often full of charm and beauty. When a Nāga assumes the human form he can be detected by the water that drips from his locks.

We know from various sources that from a very early time Takṣaka was worshipped in the country of Kashmir. In the Mahābhārata, the river Vitastā in Kashmir is said to be the abode of Takṣaka, which releases from all sin. Bilhaṇa refers a place called Jayavana where a pool filled with pure water and sacred to Takṣaka, the Lord of serpents, cuts like a war-disc the head of Kali bent on the destruction of Dharma. Takṣaka is mentioned in the fascinating legend of the destruction of Narapur narrated by Kalhaṇa in his Rājatarangiṇi. But the Nāga who brings about the ruin of the wicked king and his capital is Suśravas.

Abul-Fazl refers some more Nāgas which were famous for their miraculous faculties. He writes that in the vicinity of Ver Nāga, there is a spring which remains dry for six months. On a stated day, the peasants flock to worship and make offerings of a sheep or goat. The miracle happens and the water flows forth which irrigates the cultivation of five villages. There is another spring called Kokar Nāga, the water of which is limpid, cold and wholesome. If a hungry person drinks it, his hunger is appeased and its satisfaction in turn renews appetite.

Vogel observes[2]:

"The information supplied by Abul Fazl takes us back to a period three centuries ago. But even at the present time the capricious spirits of the water appear to have lost little of their influence upon the minds of the agricultural population of the Happy Valley."

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2. Indian Serpent Lore, p. 231.

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9

Serpent Worship in the Ancient World

It is not easy to account for the worship of serpents, which appears to us at the present day so strange. James Fergusson[1] observes:

> "If not the oldest, it ranks at least among the earliest forms through which the human intellect sought to propitiate the unknown powers. Traces of its existence are found not only in every country of the old world, but before the new was discovered by us, the same strange idolatry had long prevailed there, and even now the worship of the serpent is found lurking in out of the way corners of the globe, and startles us at times with the unhallowed rites which seem generally to have been associated with its prevalence."

Various qualities of the serpent and its exceptional power may have sufficed to excite curiosity and obtain respect. The poison fang of the serpent is so deadly in its action that such power must have impressed the people in an early stage of civilization with feelings of awe. With savages it is quite true that most religions sprung from a desire to worship those powers from whom they fear. But how the evil powers came to be regarded as the bringer of health, wealth and happiness, is

1. Tree and Serpent Worship.

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difficult to explain. "His (serpent) worship may have originated in fear, but long before we become practically acquainted with it, it had passed to the opposite extreme among its votaries."

Fear cannot be the main cause of serpent worship. Love and admiration more than fear seem to be the main features of the faith. In the present state of our knowledge it is difficult to indicate the locality where serpent worship first appeared, or the time when it first became established among mankind. James Fergusson is of the view that serpent worship originated in the mud of the Lower Euphrates, among a people of Turanian origin. From there it went to the other parts of world where a Turanian people settled. He further holds that the essence of serpent worship is diametrically opposite to the spirit of the Veda or of the Bible. "On the other hand, any form of animal worship is perfectly consistent with the lower intellectual status of the Turanian races, and all history tells us that it is among them, and essentially among them only that serpent worship is really found to prevail."

EGYPT

It is one of the earliest civilized countries of the ancient world. All the knowledge was divine to them. Whatever they saw, they worshipped. So the animal kingdom was also considered worthy of worship. Serpents were included in their multifarious Pantheon. The serpent was worshipped on the banks of Nile with a certain degree of pre-eminence. The serpent very frequently appears in the sculptures of the temple walls, and frequently in a place of honour.

JUDEA

In the second and third chapters of Genesis, the planting of the Trees of Life and Knowledge in the Garden of Eden is described in full detail. The custody of the Trees seems to have been entrusted to the serpent. In fact the history of Jewish religion commences with the call of Abraham, and from that time the worship of serpents took less important position. Virtually, there is no mention of serpents in the Bible or in any

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of the traditions connected with Abraham or his immediate descendants.

With the Brazen serpent in wilderness we tread on surer ground; it is the first record of actual serpent worship. The cause of this adoration is said to have been its healing powers. Afterwards we became so familiar with it in Greek mythology, that serpent himself represents Aesculapius and is the indispensable concomitant of Hygieia. But again it vanishes. "Neither in Bible, however, nor in Talmud, is there anything that would justify the assertion that serpent worship, even in the most modified form, prevailed among the Jews after its abolition by Hezekiah. It cropped up again, as we shall presently see, in the Christian sect of Ophites, but probably in this instance the superstition was derived from Persia." However, it is difficult to suppose that serpent worship was extinguished in Judea.

We do not know how long serpent worship continued in Syria, but it is clear that after the seventh century, the Muslim invasion swept away a large mass of the parasitic superstitions which has fastened themselves on Christianity.

PHOENICIA

The Tyrian coins and other monuments prove the prevalence of serpent worship on the sea-board of Syria. The coins of Tyre often represent a tree with a serpent coiled round its trunk and on either hand two rude stone pillars. They indicate that serpent was perhaps worshipped in Tyre from an early period. Sir Henry Rawlinson informs us that Hoa, the third person in the Babylonian trinity of great gods, may be considered as the serpent deity. The only direct testimony we have of serpent worship in Babylon is in that part of the Book of Daniel which is now printed separately in the Apocrypha. Diodorus informs us in his description of the three statues that adorned the great Temple of Belus; that of Rhea being accompanied by too very large silver images of serpents, each weighing 30 talents; and that of Juno, standing with her right hand resting on a serpent's head.

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GREECE

Serpent worship certainly prevailed to a greater or less extent during the whole period of Grecian history. It was more marked during the earliest part. It is an interesting point to note that the earlier myths refer to the destruction of the serpents. This continues down to the return of the Heraclidae. The serpents are treated kindly after the Hellenic supremacy was assured. Serpent became the guardian of the city and the healing god. One of the most celebrated myths of Greece relates the destruction of the dragon Python by Apollo. Cadamus fought and killed the dragon that devoured his men. In Indian language he killed the Nāgarāja of Thebes. The tradition of the close of the career of Cadamus and his wife is even more suggestive of serpent worship than the event of their life.

Though Hercules is said to be the destroyer of serpents, yet he is supposed to have been the progenitor of the whole race of serpent worshipping Scythians, through his intercourse with the serpent Echidna.

After the return of Heraclidae, serpents have been kept at Delphi and in the caves of Trophonius, apparently for oracular purposes. The great centre of serpent worship is Epidaurus where the serpents were kept and fed down to the time of Pausanias. The serpents figure in Greek mythology as the representatives of gods, or as delivering its oracles, or guarding sacred places.

Plutarch tells us that Olympias, the mother of Alexander had kept tame snakes in her house. Philip probably believed in the possibility of serpent being the real father of Alexander the Great. Lucian is also of the view that Alexander was born of a serpent.

It is easy to multiply the instances of serpent worship among the Greeks to almost any extent; but enough has been said to show how important part it played in the mythology of Greece.

ITALY

Generally Etruscans do not appear to be serpent worshippers. The only tradition that seems to give a local and indigenous

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form to serpent worship is that connected with Lanuvium, a place sixteen miles south of Rome. Aelian tells us that there existed a large and dark grove, and near it a temple of the Argive Juno. In this place there was a vast and deep cave which was the abode of great serpent. To this grave the virgins of Latium were taken annually to ascertain their 'chastity, which was indicated by the dragon. If the serpent accepted the offering, not only was their purity considered as established, but a good and fertile season was sure to result from the success of the ordeal. A similar oracle seems to have existed in Epirus, where a circular grave once stood surrounded by a wall in which the sacred serpents were kept. On the great festival of the year a virgin priestess entered the grove naked, holding in her hand the sacred food. If they took it readily, a fruitful harvest was sure to follow. On the contrary if they refused, it was considered as the gloomiest of auguries.

Every one is familiar of the two snakes sent by Minarva to destroy Laocoon for his attempt to undeceive the fated Trojans. Their task accomplished, they sought refuge behind the shield of Pallas in her temple in the town. There is one passage in Perseus. It is that in which the Satirist orders "two serpents to be painted on the wall to indicate that the place is sacred". A great Roman like scipio Africanus is reported to have believed that he had been nursed by a serpent. Augustus allowed it to be understood that his mother Atia had received him from a serpent.

The emperor Tiberius kept a tame serpent for his amusement but one morning when he found it eaten by ants, he procured a large serpent from India and placed it in the temple of Jupiter Olympius at Athens. It is a difficult problem to determine how far the representation of serpents on coins may be regarded as indicating the existence of serpent worship in the cities to which they belong. James Fergusson holds, ".....but I may state that my impression is, that these coins and other evidence do prove the existence of a form of serpent worship in the cities of Asia Minor till after the Christian era."

SARMATIA

According to Erasmus Stella, "In Sarmatia, for some time they had no sacred rites; at length they arrived at such a

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pitch of wickedness that they worshipped serpents and trees." The Samogitae worshipped the serpent as a god, and if any adversity befell them, they thought that their domestic serpents had been negligently served. In Lithuania the people worshipped vipers and serpents as gods. Jerome of Prague in the fifteenth century, saw the idolaters offer sacrifice to serpents. Every householder had a snake in the corner of his house to which he gave food. Cromer charges the Prussians with same idolatry. Masius refers a royal town near Wilna where in his days serpents were worshipped. The general impression is that serpent worship must have prevailed in Eastern Europe during the middle ages.

SCANDINAVIA

Buddhism and Wodenism are essentially opposed to each other yet the two religions came in contact at their base; for underlying both, there existed a strange substratum of tree and serpent worship.

The serpent is not mentioned as an actual object of worship in any written history, though there is no doubt that the superstition prevailed down to the ninth century on the introduction of Christianity. We are told that in the sixteenth century, there are house serpents, which are accounted in the northern parts of Sweden as household gods. They are fed with sheep and cow's milk, and to hurt them is a deadly sin. "At the same time it seems tolerably clear that such a serpent mythology as existed in Sweden could never have sprung up naturally in so northern a climate, where all the snake tribes are so insignificant. It must have been imported from the East, though we have yet to learn by whom this was done, and at what exact time it was effected."

FRANCE

We know very little about the primitive worship of the early inhabitants of Gaul. The traces of serpent worship in Gaul are so few that people would be inclined to think that it did not exist among Celts. The only passage that connects the Druids with serpents is given by Pliny in his

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natural history. There he relates about an egg produced by the breath of a number of serpents, who meet together for the purpose of producing it. This fable by implication would suggest that some superstition regarding serpents may have existed in Gaul. Fergusson observes[2]:

> "There is still one argument which has occasionally been hinted at in the previous pages, which may be considered as tending to show that serpent worship may have prevailed among the Celts. They certainly indulged in human sacrifices, and where this custom prevails, we generally find serpent worship accompanying it."

But this does not appear to be a positive proof for the prevalence of serpent worship among the Celts. Recent researches brought to light that pre-Celtic race in France may have been serpent worshippers, but they seem to have been obliterated by the Celts in pre-Christian times.

GREAT BRITAIN

According to antiquarians, when the Druids ruled absolutely in this land, serpent worship was essentially the religion of the people. It is interesting to note that neither Caesar nor any other Roman ever said he saw a Druid in this country. They never mention their temples and no one ever assisted at their rites. We know that the majority of the inhabitants were Celts, yet it cannot be denied that Druids may have existed in England. Even then their connection with serpent worship rests wholly in a spurious passage in Pliny. It is principally from Welsh bards, that we depend for our knowledge of the Druids, and serpent worship. It is through Welsh agency and almost within sight of the hills, as at Stanton Drew in Somersetshire that the serpent is introduced. "Beyond this we do occasionally find traditions of the serpent, they are few and far between, and of uncertain origin....."

A far more promising field for the investigation of serpent worship in Britain occurs in Scotland. In that country there exists even at the present day a great number of Megalithic

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2. Tree and Serpent Worship, p. 24.

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monuments, many of which are covered with sculptures and among them serpent appears frequently and prominently. We can safely assume that serpent was considered an object of worship by those who erected those monuments. These sculptures must have belonged to sixth century A.D.

AFRICA

In Africa serpent worship even now flourishes in all its pristine vigour. One of the best known example of serpent worship exists in upper Egypt at a place called Sheikh Haredi. Norden who visited the place in 1738 gives a very interesting account. He reveals that in honour of the serpent, sheep and lambs are sacrificed. When a number of women visit the serpent which they do once a year, he comes out of his cave and twines himself about the neck of the most beautiful.

Serpent was extensively worshipped in Abyssinia in the fourth century A.D. We do not know whether the great dragon who is said to have lived at Axum was a god or a serpent.

In Africa serpent worship flourishes in conjunction with all those peculiarities of which only traces can be found elsewhere. The three gods worshipped in Whidah are serpents, trees and ocean. Of these, the serpent called Danh gbwe is the first. The ancestor of the present race of serpent gods is said to have deserted from the Ardrat people ages ago. He was received by the Whidah people with the highest honour. He is reported to be still alive. Des Marchais gives a full description of the worship of this god. Besides this earthly serpent, there is the heavenly one, commonly called Danh. It confers wealth on man. Its emblem is a coiled and horned snake of clay in a pot. "Christianity has swept serpent worship out of what were the limits of the Roman world, and Mahomedanism has done the same over the greater part of northern Africa. Neither influence has yet penetrated to the Gold Coast and there apparently the Negro holds his faith and his feelings fast, inspite of the progress of the rest of the world."

AMERICA

Scholars are of the view that before the discovery of Columbus, American people had extreme veneration for the

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serpent. The principal deity of the Aztec Pantheon seems Tezcatlipoca, or literally the Sun serpent. The name of the wife of Tezcatlipoca, was Tonacacihua, the female sun. According to Mexicans, she gave to the light at a single birth two children, one male and the other female, to whom they refer the origin of mankind. A more remarkable myth is that of a feathered serpent. He is born of a pure virgin in the province of Tollan. He was the great law giver and civilizer of the inhabitants of Anahuac. He taught them agriculture, use of metals and various arts of life.

The antiquarians of United States tell us about great serpent mounds formed of earth which would prove that before the present race of Red Indians inhabited the states of Ohio and Iowa, a race of serpent worshippers occupied their places.

Bernal Diaz tells us that rattlesnakes were kept in the temple at Mexico as sacred objects. They were fed with the bodies of the sacrificed, and with dog's meat.

OCEANIA

It is a well-known fact that serpent worship prevailed in some islands of the Pacific. In the Fiji islands Degei, one of their principal gods, is supposed to exist in the form of a serpent, lying coiled up in a cave of Navata.

The savages of Australia believe in the gigantic serpent, who created the world by a blow of his tail and who is the cause of earthquake. Traces of serpent worship are found at Suku and Kedal and other places in Java.

CEYLON

According to Buddhist scriptures Ceylon was inhabited by a Nāga race of serpent worshippers when converted to Buddhism. The three Ceylonese historical works—the Mahāwanso, the Ratnācari and Rājāvali, all commence with an account of the conversion of the Nāgas of Ceylon by Buddha himself. The conversion of the island seems to be complete in the time of Aśoka. In the words of James Fergusson[3]:

"My impression is that after more than 2,000 years, their

3. Tree and Serpent Worship, p. 56.

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conversion is still far from being complete. Whenever any competent person will look below the surface, I am very much mistaken if the old serpent worship is not found still practised by the aboriginal races in all remote parts of the island....."

PERSIA

We have no material remains of serpent worship in Persia. The Zend-Avesta embodies the religious belief of the Āryans and it is difficult to find there the traces of serpent worship.

The most important person in ancient Persian history, for our present purpose is Zohāk. He is said to have conquered Central Asia and to have fixed his residence at Babel. Reign of his dynasty lasted for about one thousand years, when it was overthrown by Feridun.

Zohāk is represented by all Muslim historians as having two serpents growing at his back, one from each shoulder, and add that it was necessary to appease these monsters by sacrificing daily two young men in order that their craving might be satisfied with their brains. It is also probable that the three heads of the Zend-Avesta include the human head between the two snakes. There is a view that serpent dynasty most probably reigned in Media rather than in Persia proper. But they must have been extined before the time of Cyrus.

The one important material trace of serpent worship that is found in Persia occurs in a bas-relief at Nakshi-Rustem, near Persepolis. It represents Ormuzd bestowing the circlet of royalty on Ardishir Bebegān the first king of Sassanian line (A.D. 226). Beneath the feet of the horse on which the god is seated, lies Ardevan, the last of the Parthians, and round his head are twisted two writhing snakes which probably indicate the Parthian as of the hated race of Zohāk.

CAMBODIA

This is certain that the great Cambodian temple of Nakhon Vat was wholly dedicated to serpent worship. Every angle of every roof is adorned with a seven-headed serpent. Arrangement of the temple is most suited for serpent worship only.

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There is no image in the sanctuary. All the courts are tanks that contain water. In the words of James Fergusson[4]:

> "Neither in India, nor so far as is known is there any other temple, displaying the same amount of patient labour devoted to the elaboration of appropriate ornament over so extended surface as in this newly discovered temple."

There is a view that serpent worship reached Cambodia from the North. But the difficulty in assuming this theory is that communication between Tibet and Cambodia is barred by ranges of mountains, which are practically impassable. The only thing which seems to be correct is that this worship came from India by sea. The subjects depicted on the temple are borrowed from Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata. In fact the builders of the temples are Indians. It is a well known fact that Indian colony did reach Java by sea and introduced their own faith and built wonderful temples, which in many respects resemble those of Cambodia.

The Cambodian legends which refer to the colonization of the country and the building of the city of Inthapattapuri, are similar to those related by Hiuen-Tsang. In all the dragon king's daughter is the principal personage, and from her the royal race claim to be descended.

CHINA

Kaempfer relates that two heaven-sent serpents watched over the first washing of Confucius, for which a spring burst forth from the floor of the cave in which he was born. Father Martin, one of the Jesuits who settled in China, says that the Chinese delight in mountains and high places, because there lives the dragon, upon whom their good fortune depends. They call him the father of happiness. To this dragon they erect temples, shaded with groves.

The most satisfactory evidence regarding serpent worship in China is from a Chinese work, entitled "The Great Cloud Wheel Rain asking Sutra". It forms part of great collection of Buddhist standard works. It is supposed to be spoken by Buddha in the "beautifully adorned Great Cloud Circle Hall of

4. Tree and Serpent Worship, p. 48.

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the Nāgarāja Nanda Upananda, and consists of a succession of Dhāraṇis imparted by Buddha to the dragons for the sake of those who in their worship desired rain."

The most important part of the book is the plates. They represent a Nāga temple.

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10

Nagas in Fairy Tales

Bṛhatkathā, Panchtantra, Bṛhatkathāmanjari and Kathā-saritsāgara contain a marvellous collection of fables and fairy tales in which serpents play an important part. Unfortunately Guṇādhya's Bṛhatkathā is lost. Guṇādhya is reputed to be the son of a Nāga prince. Kashmirian poet Somadeva completed his work between the year A.D. 1063 and 1081. It was a recast of Bṛhatkathā. Another ancient book of stories Bṛhatkathāmanjari was completed by a Kashmirian poet Kṣemendra about A.D. 1037. His poetical skill is decidedly inferior to that of Somadeva.

PANCHTANTRA

Panchtantra has furnished two fables in which the animal hero is a serpent. In the story of 'The Poor Brāhmaṇa and the gold granting serpent', Haridatta is a very poor agriculturist. He never reaped any crop. One day he saw a huge serpent in his field. Considering him as Kṣetra-Devata, he worshipped and offered it milk. Next day when he came to his field, he found a gold dinar. Now everyday he started offering milk to the serpent and every time he obtained a gold dinar. The son of Haridatta was a greedy boy. He thought that ant-hill must be full of gold dinars. Therefore, he decided to slay the serpent and take all the dinars. In his foolishness he lost his life. When his father knew about it, he felt very sorry. But the serpent after giving him a costly jewel asked him not to come again.

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Different versions of this story are found in western literature; yet, as Benfey remarked, it is truly Indian in spirit.

The other fable from Panchtantra gives the story of the snake, himself the son of human parents. He is wedded to a maiden. He assumes human shape in the wedding night, and his father prevents him from returning to animal state by burning the serpent hide which he had left.

KATHĀSARITSĀGARA

In the stories of Kathāsaritsāgara serpent always appears in a typical character. He is usually represented as a denizen of lake or pool. In the short story of the jealous Nāga, neither the Nāga nor his faithless wife show any Nāgan characteristics except that they inhibit a lake. The Nāga finally destroys his wife and her lover by means of a fiery blast.

The story of "The Curse of a Nāga" reminds us of the incantation scene which occurs in another famous work of Bāṇa's Harṣacharita. For our present purpose, it is of great importance that the Nāga figures here as a guardian spirit of Śrikantha. Now the country Śrikantha is the tract of Northern India to which the district of Sthāneśwara, the domain of king Puṣyabhūti belonged.

The hereditary feud between Garuḍa and the Nāgas has found a very eloquent expression in the fairy tale of Jimūtavāhana. He sacrifices himself to save an unfortunate Nāga from the giant-bird. The numerous versions of this legend in Sanskrit literature testify to it great popularity. Kathāsaritsāgara narrates this story twice. Bṛhatkathāmanjari too refers this story. This legend finds a place in the 'Twenty-five Tales of the Vetāla'. We must mention here the Sanskrit play Nāgananda, in which the legend was dramatized by the royal author Harṣa. The title of the play expresses the happy theme of the Nāgas being freed from the danger of Garuḍa owing to the hero's self-sacrifice. In the words of Vogel[1]:

"As, however, the story of Jimūtavāhana is not found in

1. Indian Serpent Lore, p. 170.

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any Indian collection of Jātakas, there is good reason to assume that the identification of the hero with the future Buddha was an afterthought and that originally the legend had no connection with Buddhism at all, however much it may conform in spirit to the lofty ethical ideas of the religion."

The Jimūtavāhana story seems to indicate that it is not an ancient myth, but a legend of late date. It is significant that we do not know of any representation of this legend in the plastic art of India. If the story had been known to the Buddhists, they would have surely carved it on their sacred monuments. It is missing at Bharhut, Sāñchi and Ajantā. The motif of Garuḍa seizing a Nāga is not at all common in Indian art. We see it for the first time in the Graeco-Buddhist school of Gandhāra. Hence the serpent is invariably shown in a human form. Nearly in all the specimens known to us the victim is a female. The best known example is the sculpture from Shanghao, in Peshawar district. In the Gandhāra sculptures, the victim of Garuḍa is invariably anthropomorphic.

Sculptural art in its purely Indian expression prefers to render the Nāga in his animal shape. On a coping stone from Amarāvati decorated with many motifs, include a Garuḍa holding a five-headed Nāga in his beak. The bird is treated in a conventional manner; but the main point of interest is that both the Garuḍa and the Nāga are theriomorphic. The same is the case with a piece of sculpture excavated from the Kankāli Tilā at Mathurā. This piece which must have formed the end of a Toraṇa architrave, is carved on one side with the figure of a Garuḍa in conflict with a Nāga. The serpent shown here is in a less helpless state than at Amarāvati. The serpent has twisted himself twice round the enemy's neck, holding its tail on to a tree.

KING UDAYANA OF VATSA AND THE LUTE

Once when the king of Vatsa was roaming in a forest in pursuit of deer, he saw a serpent which had been captured by a Sabara. Moved with pity the king requested him to release the serpent. Sabara replied, "My lord, this is my livelihood. I maintain myself by exhibiting a dancing snake." On hearing

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this Udayana gave the Sabara a bracelet and thus caused him to release the snake. Now the serpent was very much pleased with the king and gave him a wonderful lute.

The Sabara found in possession of a bracelet marked with Sahasrānika's name, is taken to the king. This leads to the reunion of the two consorts who had been separated for fourteen years. It is said that Vatsrāja used the lute to capture wild elephants.

THE NĀGA WHO REVEALED HIS SECRET

A certain Nāga, fleeing in fear of Garuḍa, assumed human shape and took refuge in a woman's house. The lady was to receive five hundred elephants for her wages. After some time the lady asked how you get so many elephants. The Nāga deluded by love, disclosed his identity to her. The lady told this secret to a Bawd. Bawd disclosed this secret to Garuḍa who was in the human form. The result was that the poor serpent was killed by the Garuḍa.

The lesson which this story teaches is that no wise man should recklessly disclose a secret to a woman.

SERPENT WORSHIP

Fables and fairy tales do not always provide material for serpent worship. But at times a clear indication of this worship is found in them. In the first two fables of Panchtantra mentioned above, we have serpent worship, at source. As soon as the Brāhmaṇa cultivator sees the serpent on the top of the ant-hill, he concludes that it must be a Devatā and guardian of the field. He starts worshipping him in the hope that it will yield him abundant crop. The serpent appears here as the giver of wealth. It is a familiar trait of serpent lore, all over the world.

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11

Conclusion

In the words of James Fergusson, "...serpent did play an important part in the mythology of India, and that his worship not only prevailed but considerably influenced forms of faith where we would least suspect his presence." At Ajantā, Fergusson found about fifteen sculptured representations of the seven-headed Nāgas. There would have been many more. The learned author saw Nāgas in all the Jaina temples at Abu, at Sadree and elsewhere but he passed them over.

Allusions are made to the feeling of respect by Indians to serpents, and no one can reside long in the country without perceiving it. In 1766, Mr. Motte visited Sambhalpore, where a great snake had been worshipped since the world began. Every seventh day that great serpent used to come out of this cave and accept the offering of a goat which his worshippers had provided. After devouring the goat he took a bath in the canal that surrounded his dwelling place. When Major Kittoe visited Sambhalpore in 1836, that serpent was still alive.

In the great temple at Madura, the three principal images in the Tosak Khāna are a golden image of Hanumāna, another of Garuḍa. Between these two stands an image of seven-headed Nāga, richly jewelled and under a splendid canopy. In the temple at Seringham, the principal images are two golden statues of the seven-headed Nāga.

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NORTHERN INDIA

At Nāga Kuān in Vārāṇasi, the serpent is worshipped even today. In a niche in the wall of one of the stairs is a figure representing three serpents and on the floor is an emblem of Mahādeo in stone and a snake crawling up it. The well is visited once a year on the 24th and 25th days of Śrāvaṇa. The women come on the first day and the men on the second; they offer sacrifices both to the well and to the serpent god.

Nāga is worshipped in the Western Himālaya up to the present day. The rural population of the Punjāb Hills still worships the serpents. Divine serpents are pleased by music, offering of flowers and incense and occasionally sacrificing a goat or ram. The Nāga temple is usually situated in a clump of Deodār tree not very far from the village. Horns of animals which have been offered in sacrifice are attached to the door-frame. The temple of Bāski Nāga sometimes contains a second image said to represent the vizir of the Nāga king. The attendants of the Nāga temple are a priest and one or more disciples. According to the popular notion the disciple is a more important personage, for the deity is supposed to prophesy through his mouth.

Usually each Nāga has annual fair where villagers from neighbourhood assemble in festive attire. Devatās of the neighbouring villages carried on the shoulders of their worshippers too attend this *melā*. The Nāgas who are now worshipped in Alpine Punjāb, have each a personal name, the origin and meaning of which are in most cases obscure. Bāski Nāga is supposed to have two brothers, Mehal Nāga and Svār Nāga. The latter has a temple near Chintā and is much dreaded for his bad temper.

Bāski Nāga is also worshipped in the hill state of Chambā. It is said that the cult of Bāski was introduced from Bhadravāh in the beginning of nineteenth century. Bāski Nāga has also a temple at Himgiri. There are a number of other serpents worshipped in various villages throughout the Chambā state. In the valley of Chināb, too, Nāga temples are found. In Pāngi there is a shrine of Det Nāga.

Kulu valley is an important centre of Nāga-worship. Here too Bāski is regarded as the chief of his tribe and father of

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the Nāgas scattered over the various villages. There is a popular opinion that the total number of Nāgas which are worshipped in Kulu are eighteen. Some say it is more than that. It is the common practice that the *melā* of each particular Nāga temple takes place annually on a fixed date. With regard to the village gods of Manḍi, Mr. Emerson remarks that the majority of them belong to the serpent group.

In Kāngrā, there is hardly any Nāga temple, but after Dipāwali Nāga-ki-Pujā is held to bid farewell to serpents. On this occasion an image of Nāga made of cowdung is worshipped, but any serpent seen after it is called ungrateful and killed forthwith. In the Simla hills, the Nāgas are prominent in folklore and popular religion.

Gugā is supposed to be the greatest of snake-gods. He is greatly venerated by the lower class in eastern Punjāb, Uttar Pradesh and Rājputānā. His close affinity with Nāga-worship is evident. In the Kāngrā district, Gugā not only cures snake-bites but bestows sons and good fortune. At Chhappar on the southern border of Ludhiana district, there is a large shrine of Gugā and annual *melā* is held on Ananta Chaudas. Another Gugā temple of some importance is at Raikot.

In Garhwāl there exists a tradition that Nāgas once resided in the valley of Alakanandā. At the present day Śeṣa is honoured at Pāṇḍukeśwar, Bhekal Nāga at Ratgaon, Sangal Nāga at Talor, Barpur Nāga at Margaon, Lohandee Nāga at Jelum in the Niti valley and Puṣkara Nāga at Nāgpur.

In the Gangetic plain, the cult of serpent is found not only in the rural population, but also in the towns. Monier Williams personally visited the Vāsuki temple at Dārā-ganj in Allahabad. A large fair is held here on Nāgapanchami, to which large number of Hindus from Allahabad and neighbouring villages come.

In Bihar, the Nāga is generally worshipped by the agricultural population.

From the above narration it is quite clear that in the vast regions of northern India, serpent worship still holds a prominent position in popular religion and tradition. Yet in those parts there is little evidence of the worship of the live animal. Even in Kulu, the live animal is hardly an object of veneration.

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WESTERN INDIA

The cult of live serpent is found in western and southern India upto present day. Kathiāvār is a great centre of Nāga worship. There are temples of Vāsuki and his brother Vaṇḍuk. The two Nāga brothers are said to have settled after having rid the country of a dangerous demon, Bhimāsur.

Besides the Vāsuki temple at Thān, other Nāga shrines in Kathiāvār are that of Pratik at Talsānā and that of Devānik Charmālia in the village of Chokri under Chudā. The most famous serpent temple of Gujrāt is Dharṇidhara, situated at the village of Dhemā in north Gujrāt. This temple is visited by pilgrims from all parts of India. There are many other local shrines in Gujrāt where the Nāga is worshipped.

SOUTHERN INDIA

Serpent worship is prevalent in the whole of southern India. The high castes consider it a sin to kill it. Serpent slabs or Nāgakals testify the popularity of this cult. They are usually found at the entrance of a town or village. Groups of such stones may be seen in the courtyard of a temple under a sacred tree. Barren ladies make a vow to install a snake-stone if they are blessed with offspring. Nāgakals show a variety of pattern. The simplest type is to exhibit a single Nāga standing on the tip of his tail with expanded hood.

In the South Kanara district, there is one of the most famous serpent temples of India. The annual *melā* is held here. The other famous serpent temple exists at Nāgapatam. The Malabar coast is a great seat of the serpent cult. In Kanara, the persons supposed to be possessed by the serpent-deity are known by the title of Nāga-patri. They are Brāhmaṇas and used to enjoy great respect. Disputes were referred to them for settlement, and their word was law.

NĀGAPANCHAMI

The great festival in honour of the serpents is the Nāga-panchami which is celebrated on the fifth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Śrāvaṇa. The rites to be observed

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on that day are laid down in a Sanskrit work Vratarāja. On this day Nāgas are made of gold, silver, wood, sandal, earth and cowdung and they are worshipped with full devotion. At Konkan, snake-charmers may be seen with live serpents to which offerings are made. In Bombay, too, the snake-charmers take the snake round the houses of the people and all classes of the inhabitants give them different kinds of edibles. In the night flowers, incense and edibles are placed before the image. The worshippers sit up all through the night.

In Bengal the date of Nāgapanchami is the fifth lunar day of Śrāvaṇa, but the observance of the rite is continued upto Bhādrapada. On these days a milky hedge-plant is planted on a raised mound, and in the form of this plant the goddess Mansā is worshipped. Here the goddess Mansā is identified with the serpent-king Vāsuki. In Bihar, the women mark their houses with lines of cowdung and worship Śeṣanāga with milk and parched grain.

In Uttar Pradesh, the usual custom is for the head of the family to bathe in the morning and to paint on the wall of his sleeping-room two rude representations of serpents and to make offerings to Brāhmaṇas. People pray to the eight chiefs of Nāgas. In the eastern districts, great festivity is made. Milk and dried rice are poured into a snake's hole.

In Garhwāl the ground is smeared with cowdung and mud. Figures of five, seven or nine serpents are drawn. Incense is burnt and food and fruits are offered. The night is spent in listening to stories in praise of the Nāga.

In the Mirzapur district, Nāga is worshipped especially by the Kols on the occasion of Nāgapanchami. In some villages fairs are held. In some parts of Uttar Pradesh the festival is celebrated in Bhādon. In the Punjāb on the day of Nāga-panchami, a figure is drawn in black on the house wall. It represents the snake-god and is believed to prevent the house from being infested with serpents.

In Nepal, the festival is held on the fifth of the dark half of Śrāvaṇa. This day is locally believed to commemorate a fearful fight between the Garuḍa and the Nāgas.

There may be some variation in the date and modes of observance, but Nāgapanchami is celebrated throughout the whole country, according to ancient rites. "Thus it continues

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to testify to the feelings of awe and veneration which the serpent evokes in the minds of population since the earliest times we have cognizance of."

James Fergusson is of the opinion that successive immigrations of no-worshipping races have nearly obliterated the religion of the serpent from the valleys of Gangā and Indus. He still feels that serpent-worship exists in Kashmir, Nepal and particularly in the hills. He is certain that it will be found throughout the valleys of Narmadā and Tāpty and among the hill tribes as far east as Burdwan. It is more or less prevalent all along the Western Ghāts. James Fergusson[1] further holds :

> "Its existence in any particular spot now must not be taken as a proof either that a serpent-worshipping tribe have not been disturbed or may have migrated to that spot, and its absence may equally be taken to prove either that it never existed there, or that it has been obliterated by other forms. All this will require much care and study before it can be satisfactorily mapped out; but the subject is of great interest, as bearing one of the oldest forms of faith that the world knows, and would amply repay any pains that might be bestowed on its investigation."

1. Tree and Serpent Worship, p. 75.

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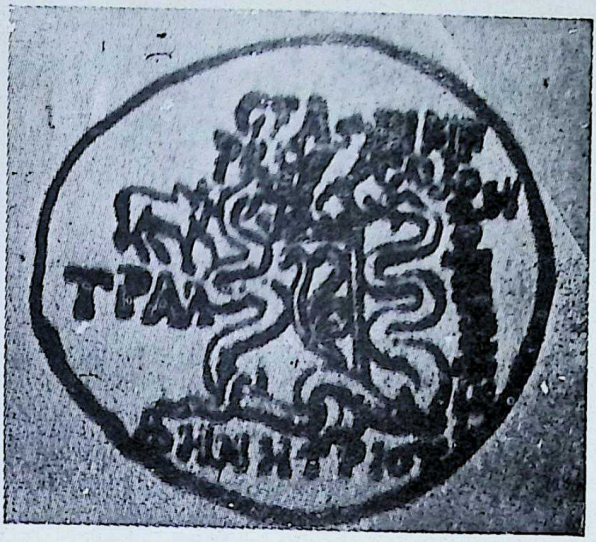

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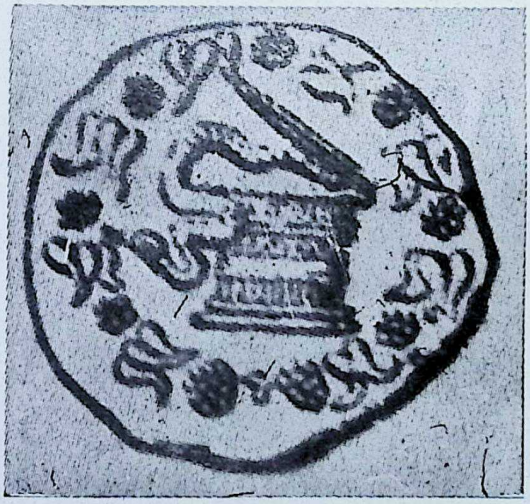

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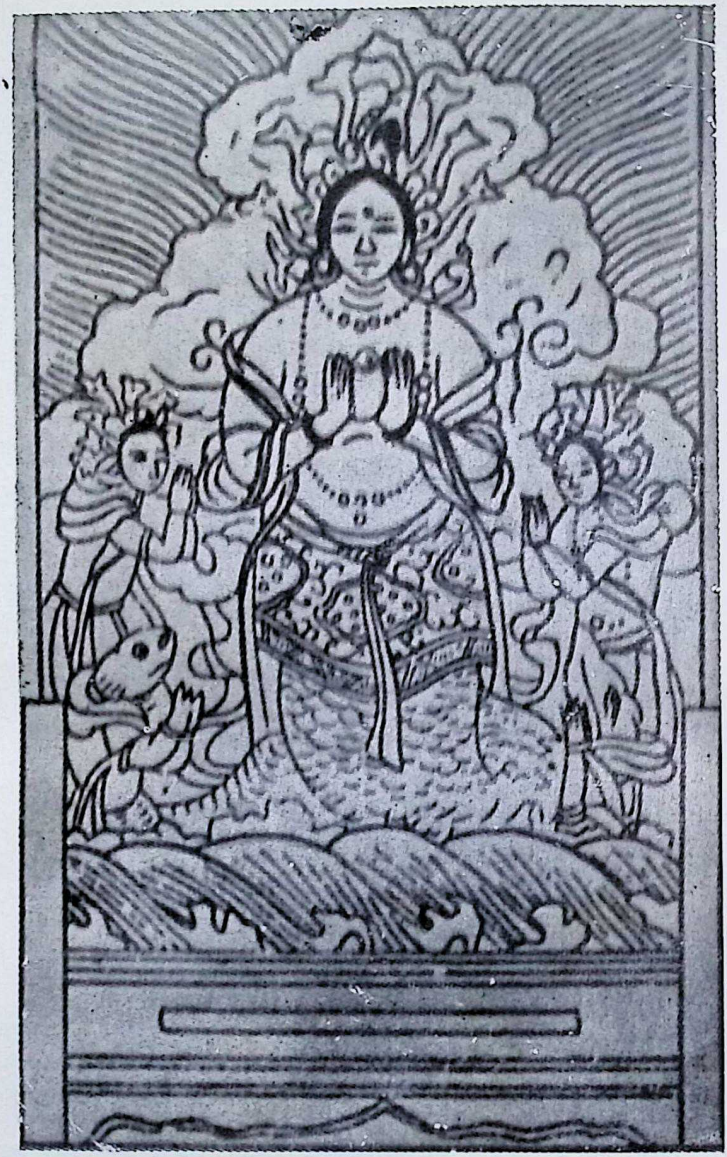

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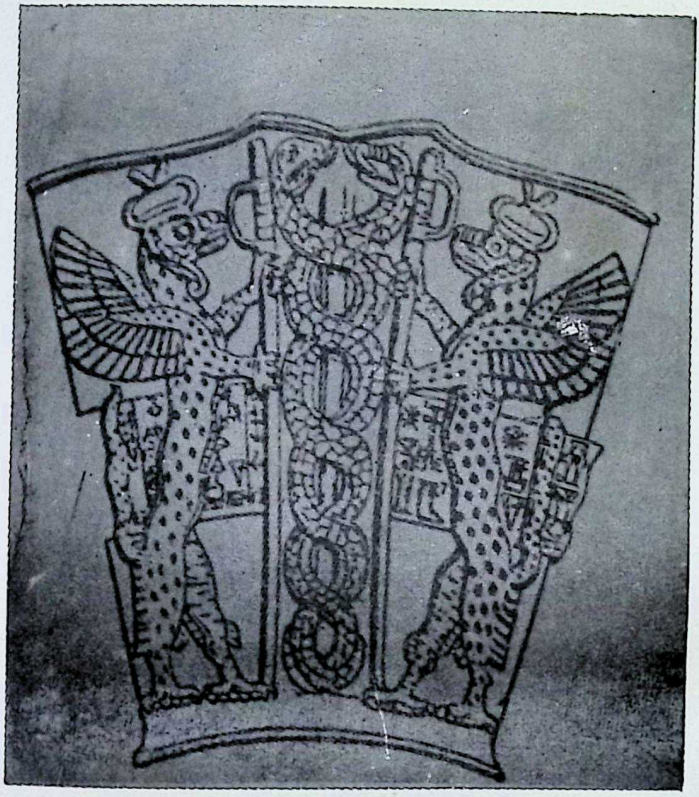

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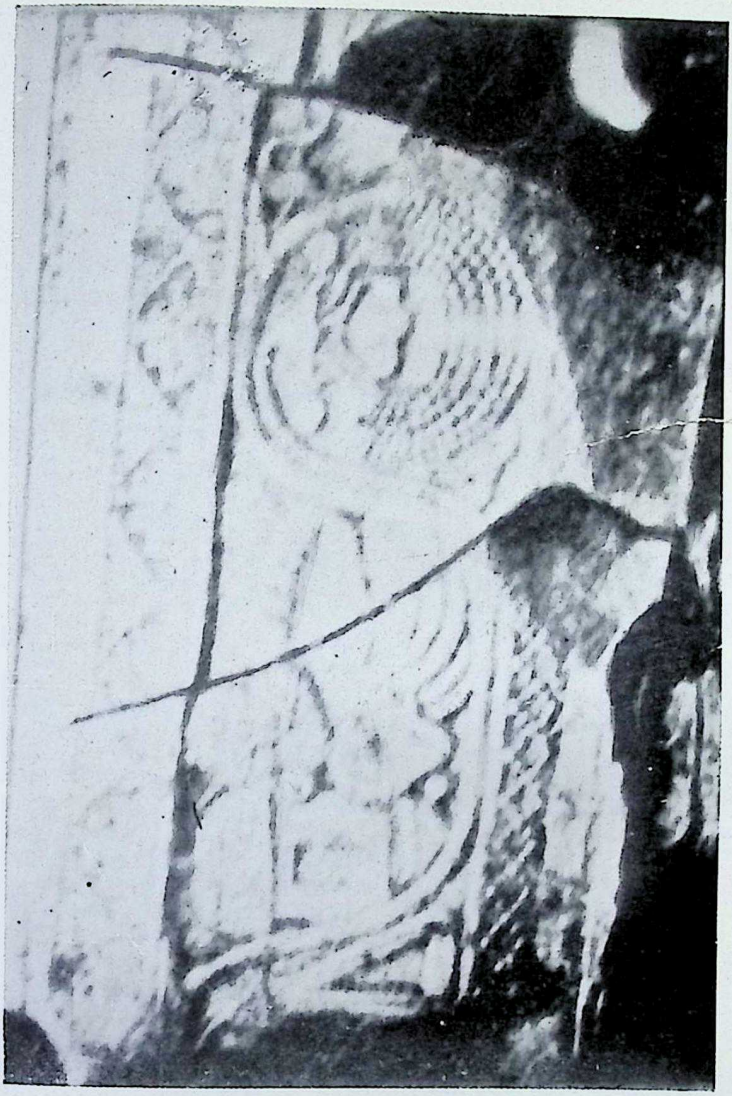

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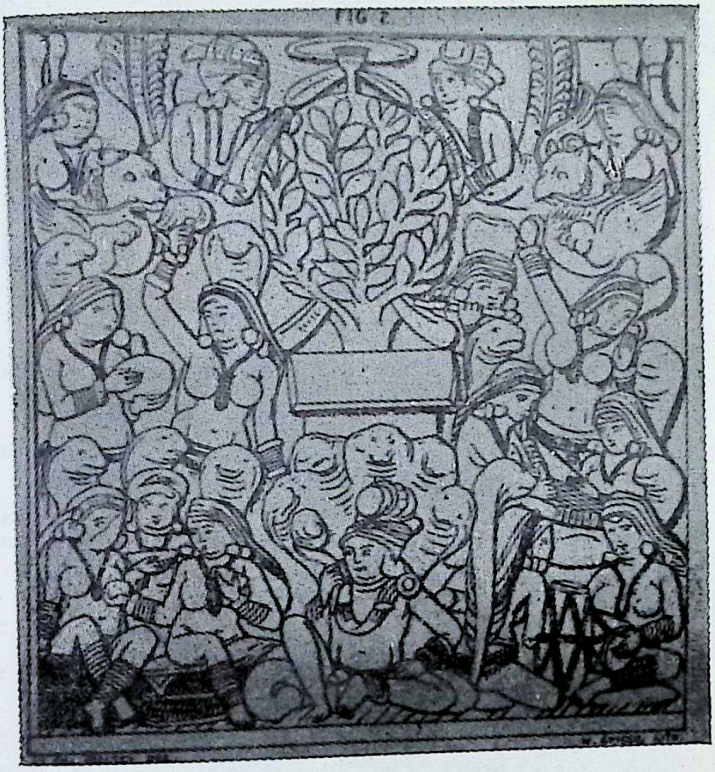

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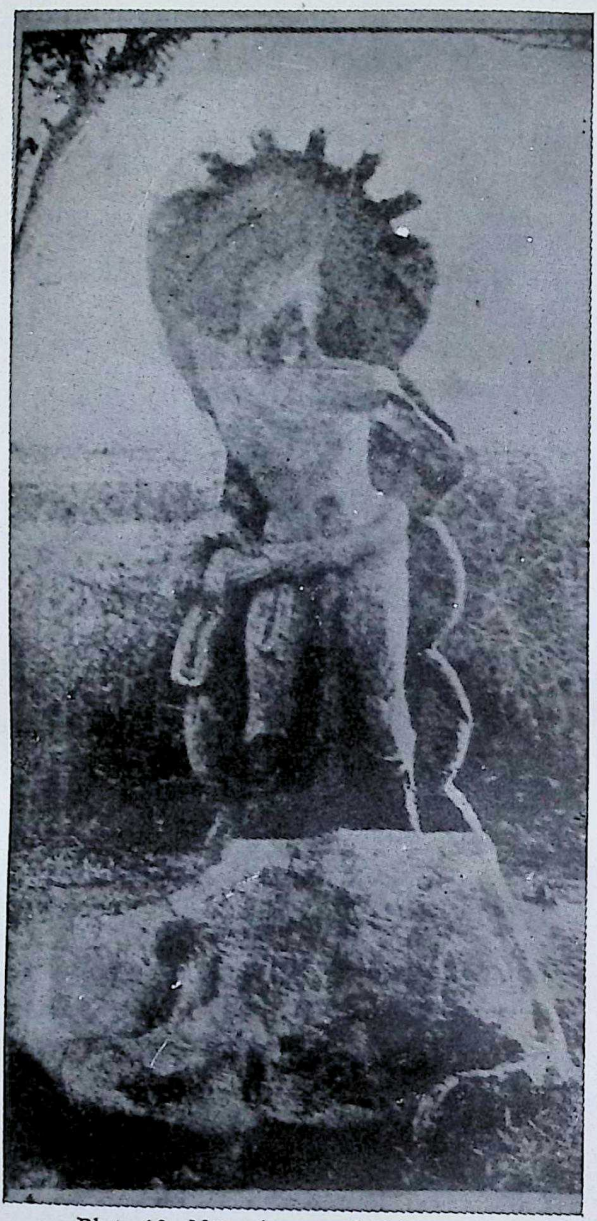

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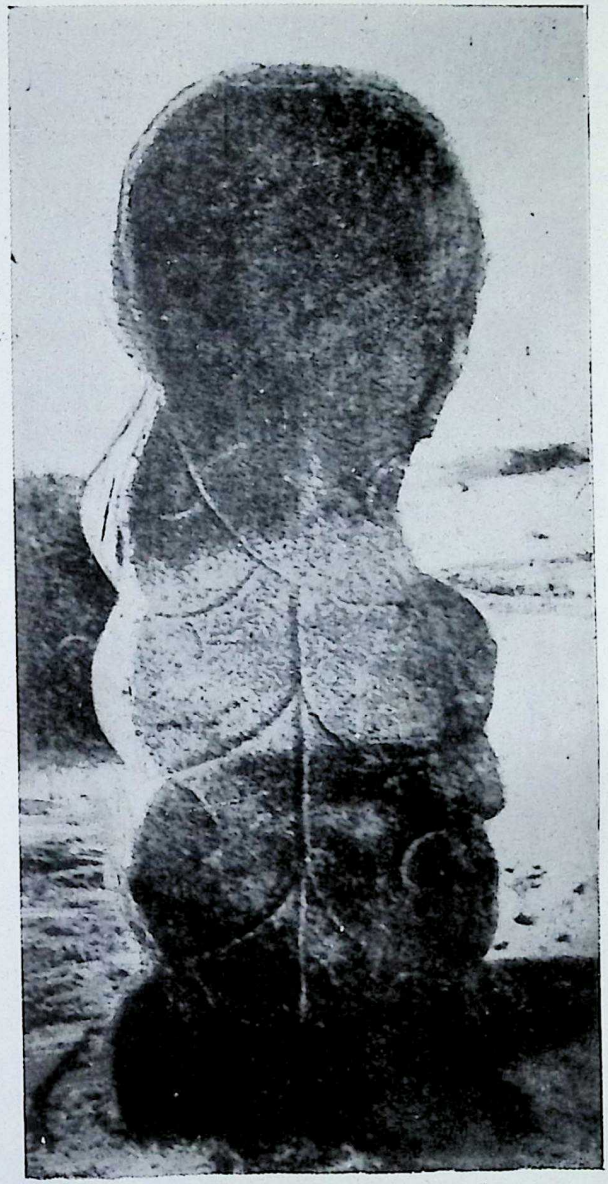

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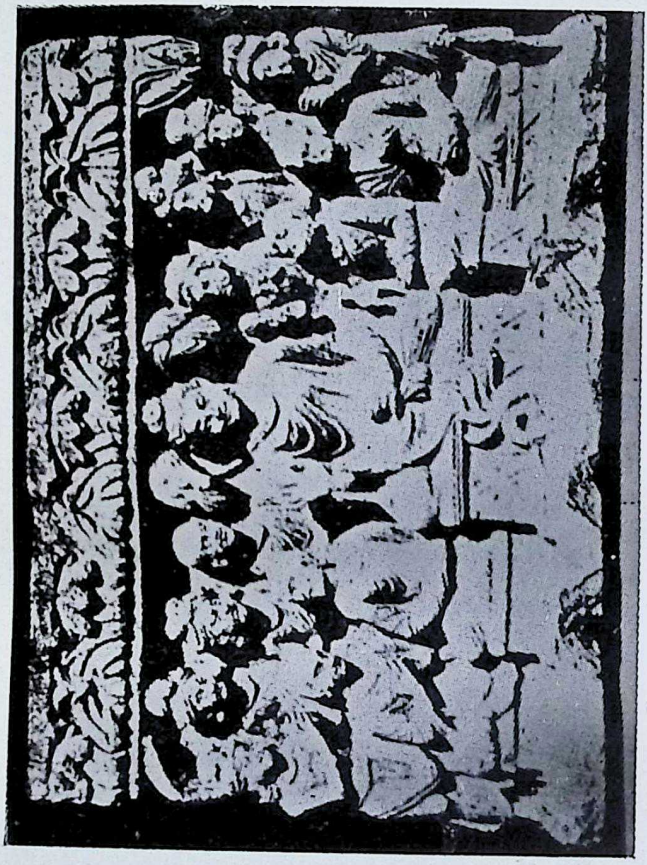

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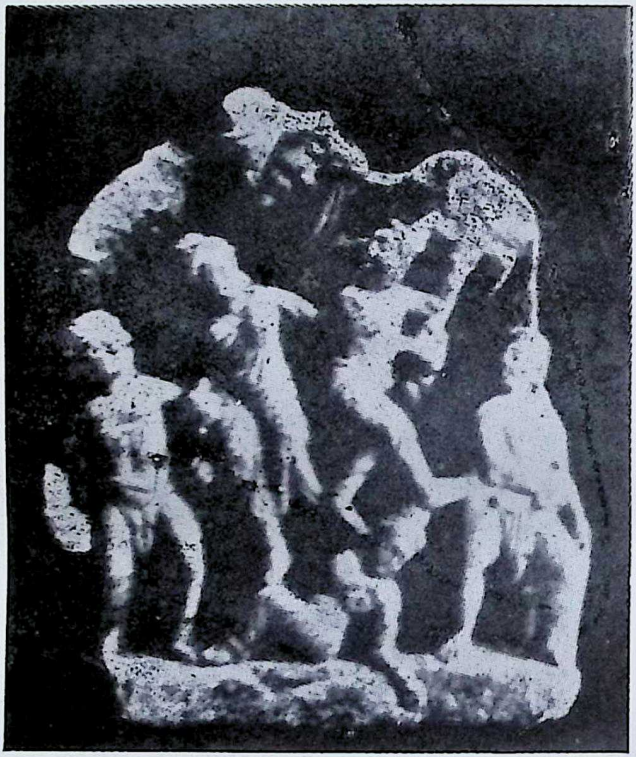

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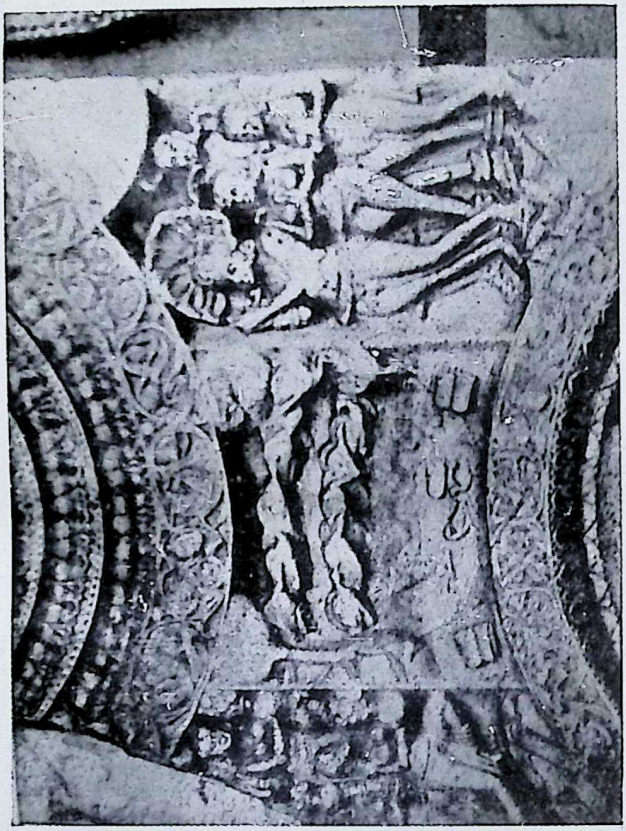

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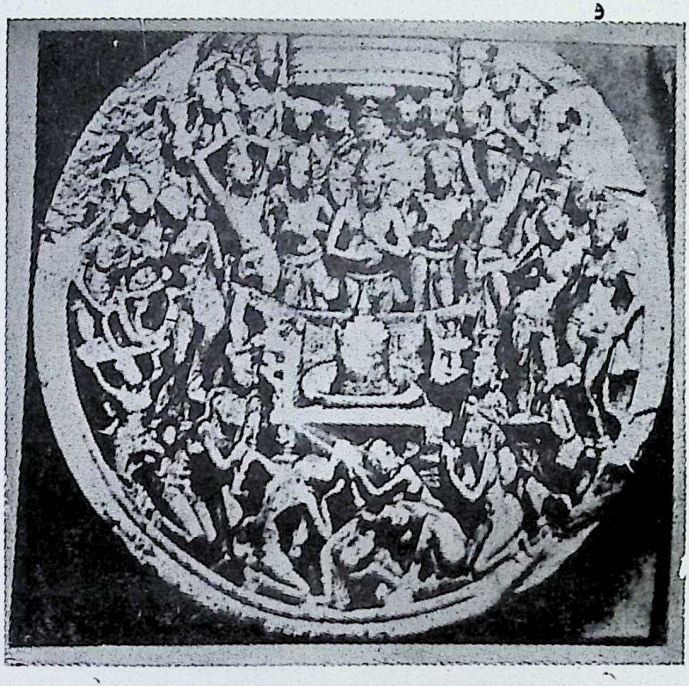

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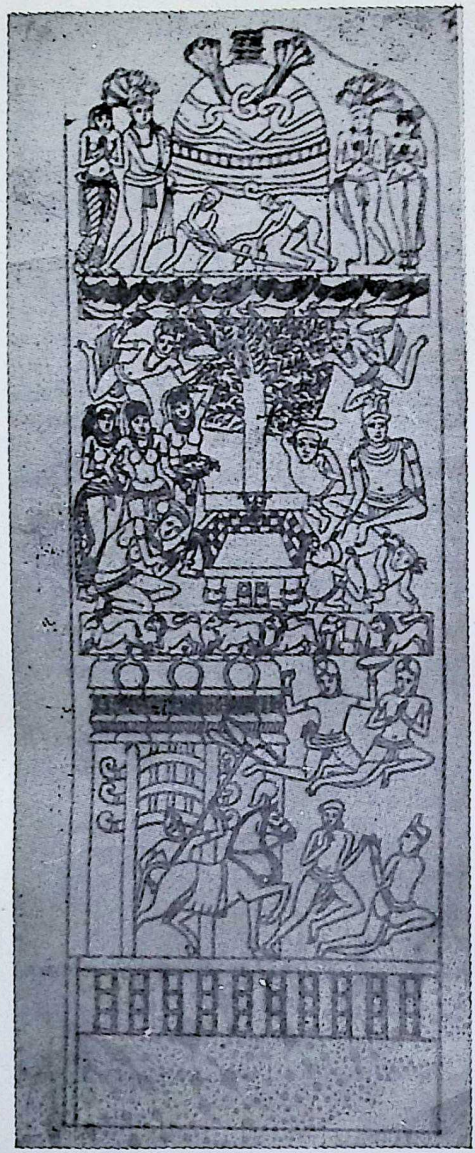

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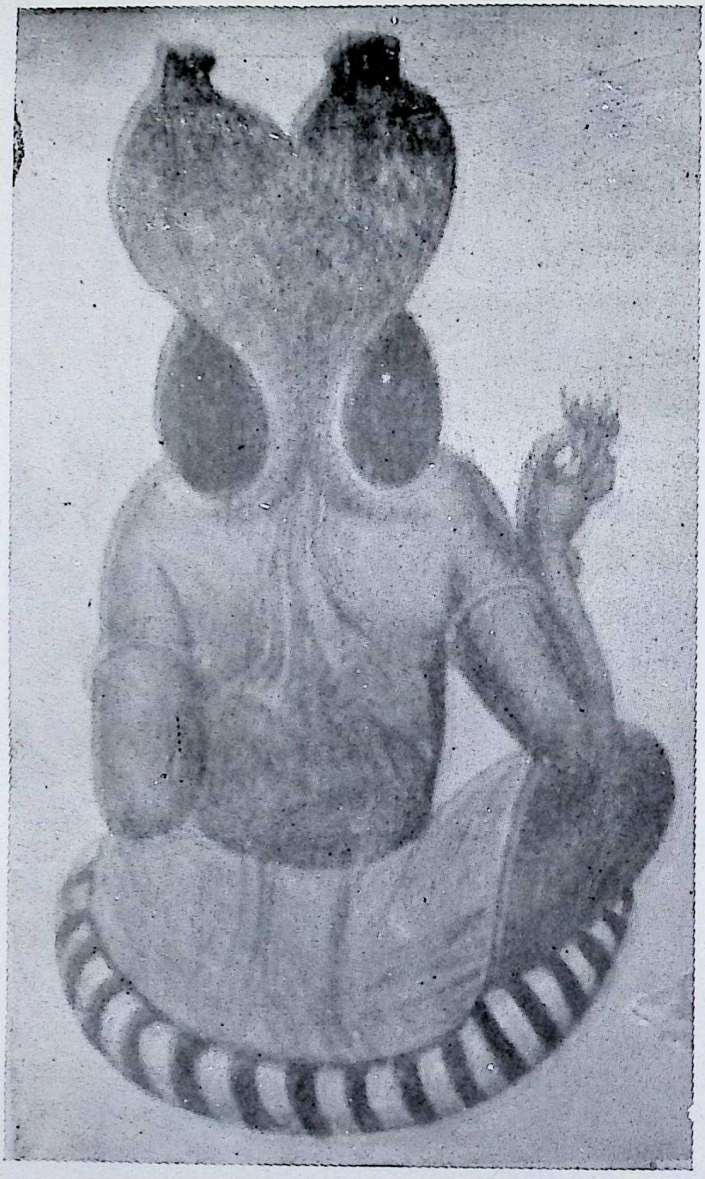

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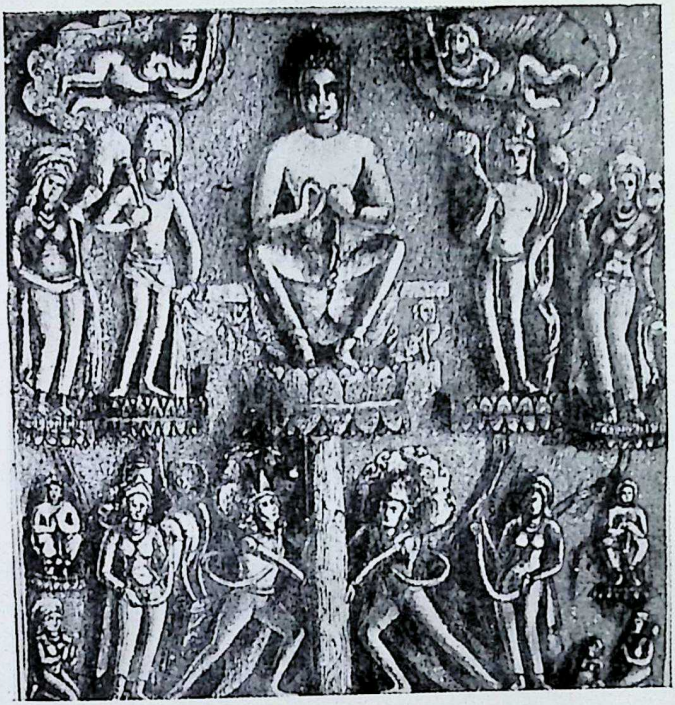

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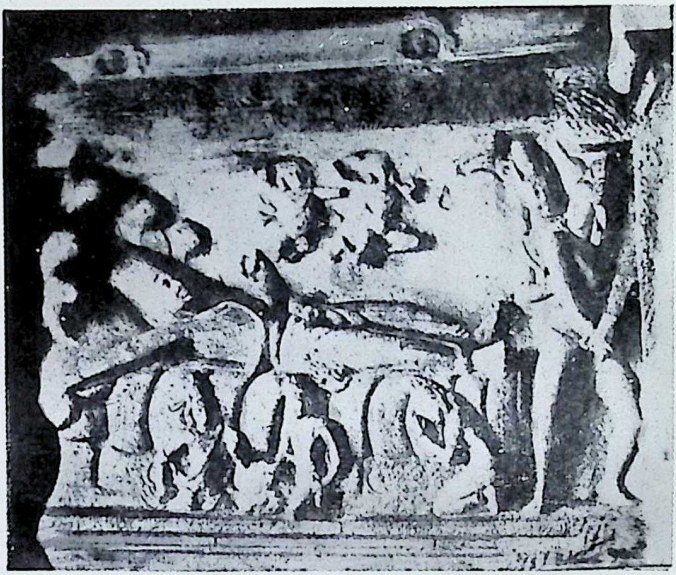

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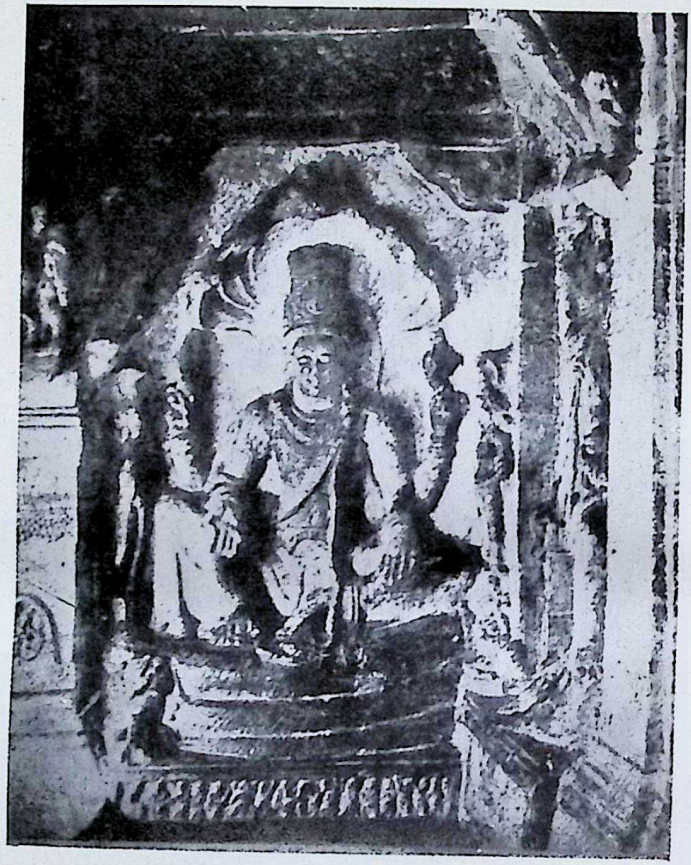

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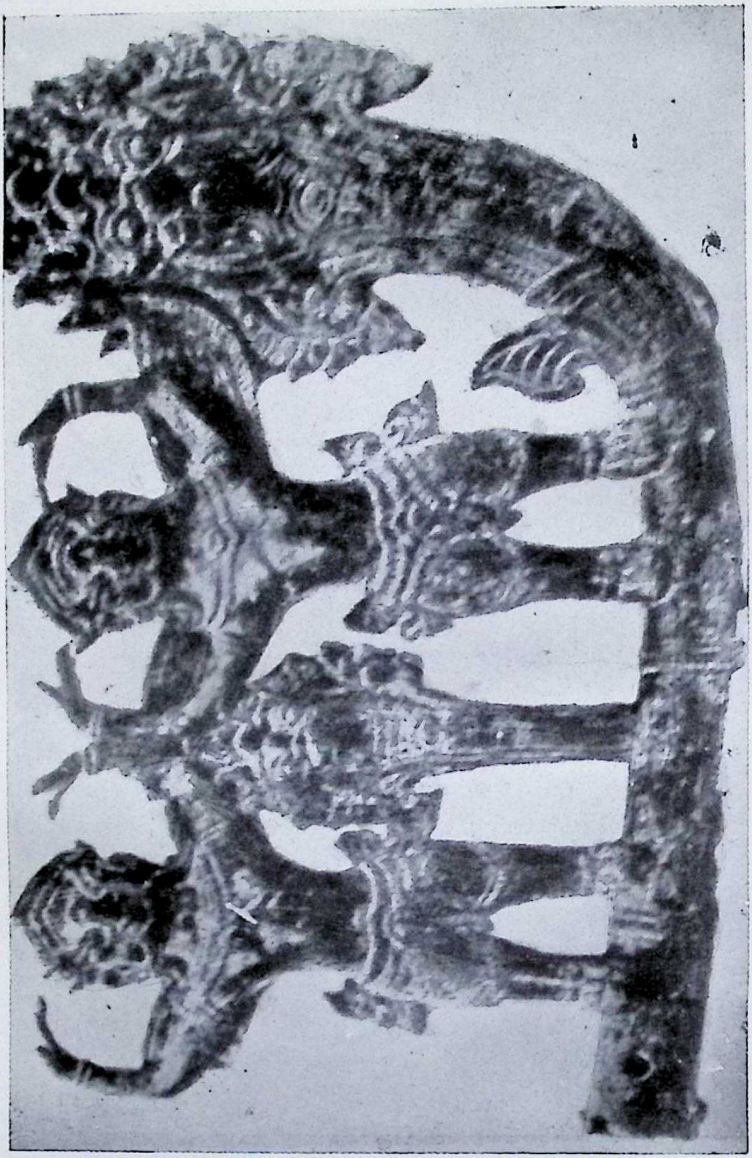

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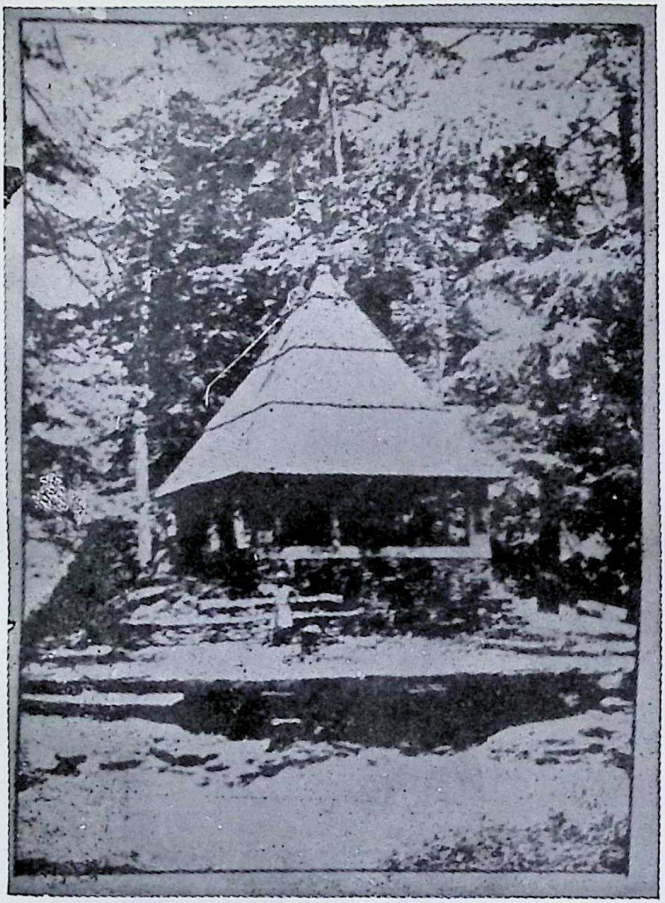

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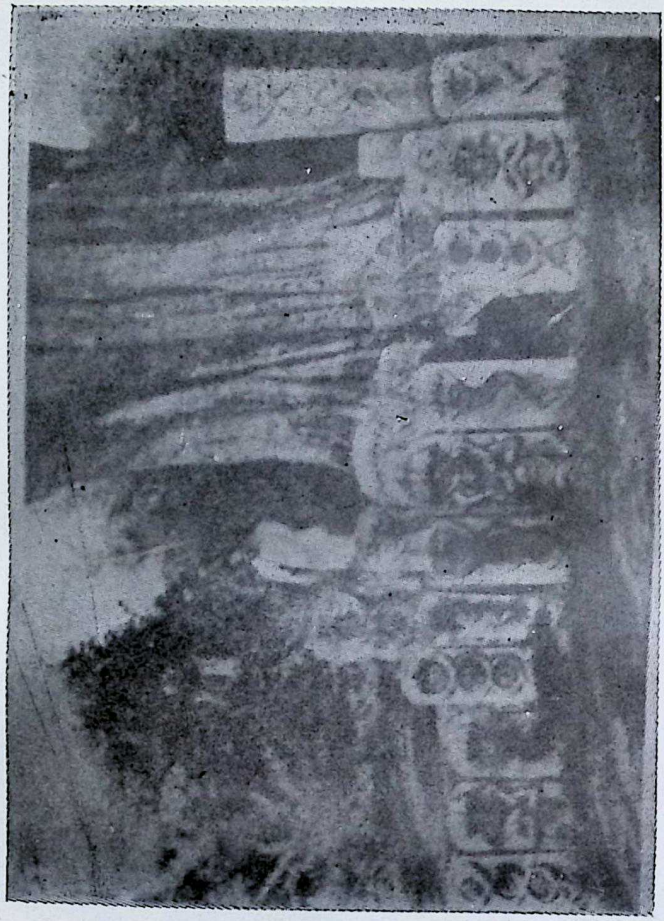

Plate 38. Nāgakals at Anekal (Mysore).

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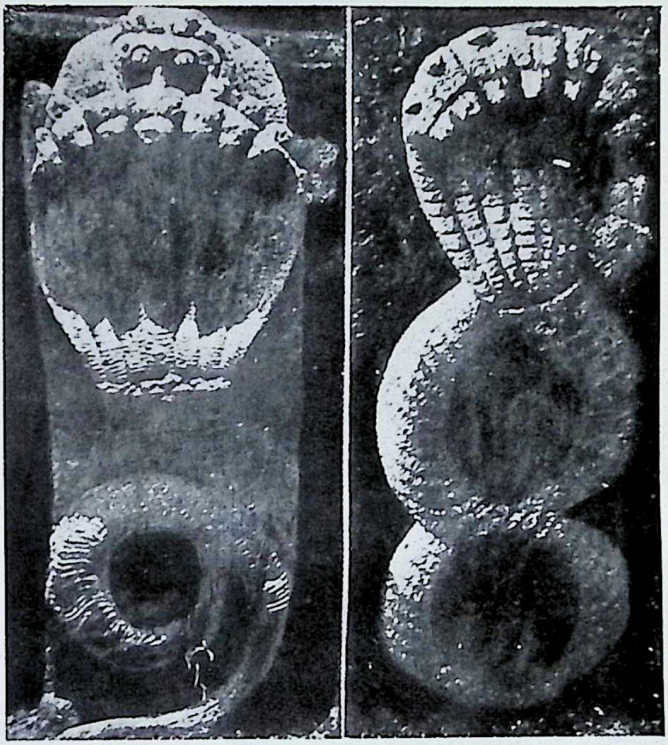

Plate 39. Nāgakals of Kikkeri (Mysore).

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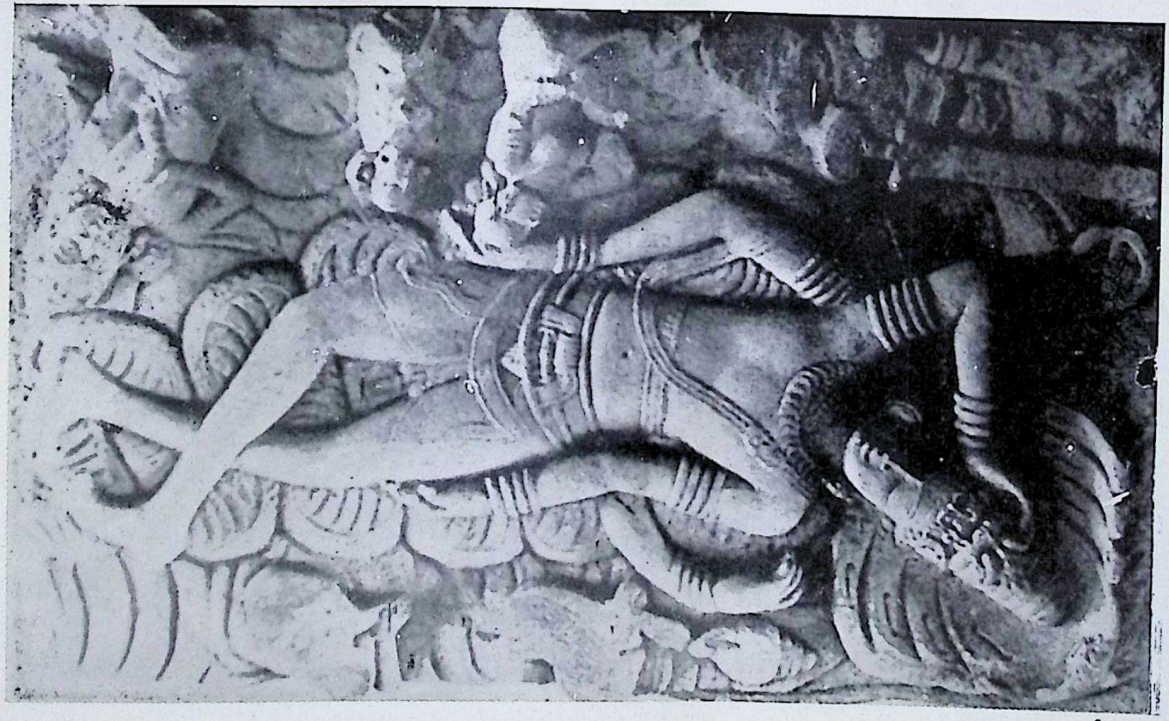
Plate 40. Viṣṇu reposing on Ananta, ceiling panel from hall of Haccappya-guḍi (Temple No. 9).



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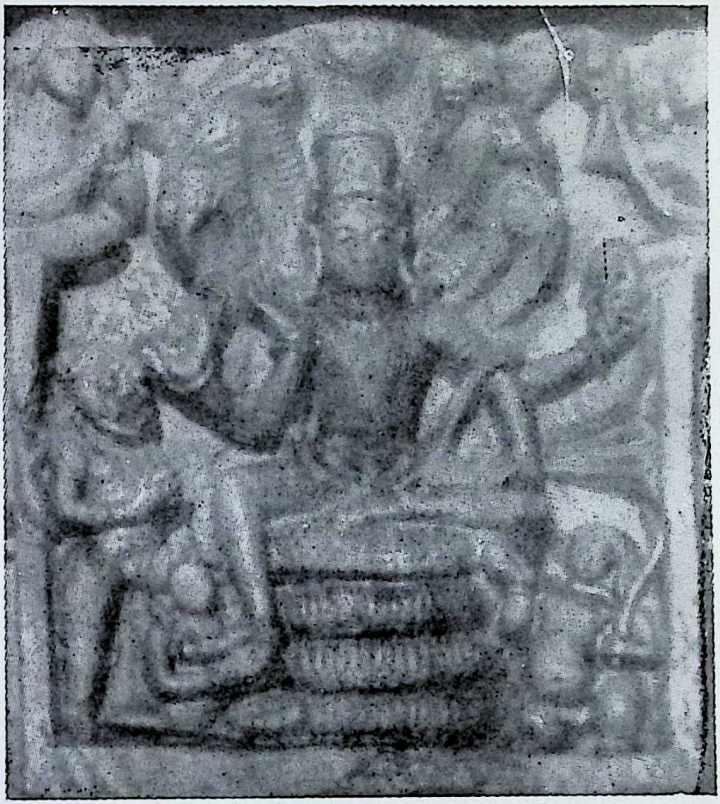

Plate 41. Viṣṇu under the serpent-hood, Deogarh.

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Plate 42. Viṣṇu under the serpent-hood, Deogarh.

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Plate 43. Viṣṇu reposing on Śeṣa, Mathurā Museum.

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Plate 44. Śeṣaśāyi, Baijanātha.

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Plate 45. Kūrma, Gwalior Museum.

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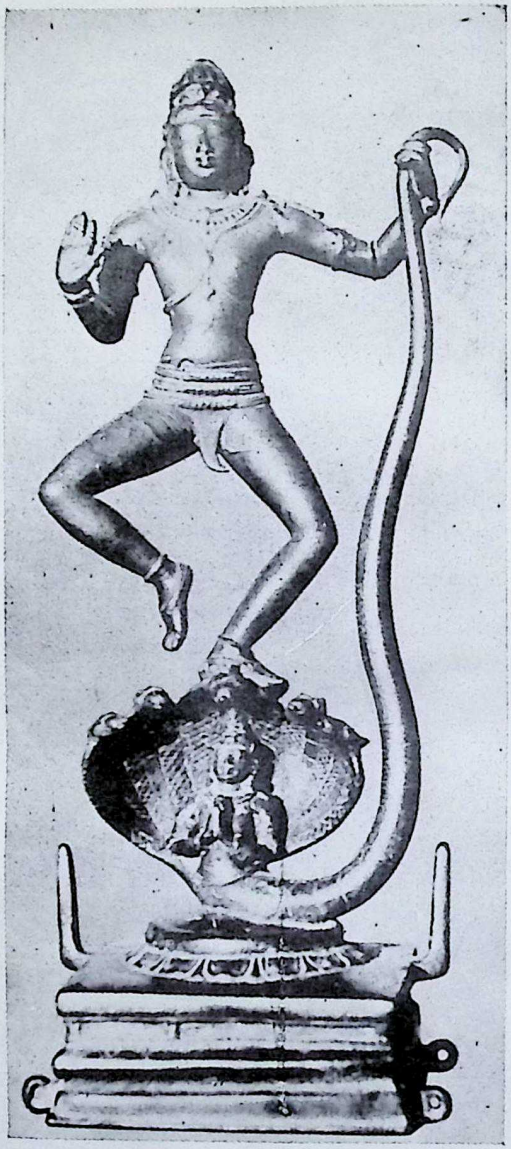

Plate 46. Kṛṣṇa dancing on Kāliya Nāga,
(Bronze) South India.

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Plate 47. Tree of Life and Knowledge, (Bronze)
South India.

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Essentials of Hinduism, Jainism & Buddhism

Dr. A. N. Dwivedi (*In Press*)

India has a rich cultural heritage, and her hoary wisdom is contained in her religious and philosophical outlook upon life. The present work studies the origin, growth and consolidation of the three great repositories of Indian life and culture, viz., Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. Of many 'isms' prevailing in this vast Asian country, these three 'isms' are outstanding in making and moulding the Indian way of life.

It is generally agreed that Hinduism is the most ancient religion (*sanatama dharma*) in India which was initially cultivated by a certain people in a certain area ("this side" of the Sindhu *i.e.* Indus river). The country owes even its name—*Hindustan*—to it. The other religions in this country are either sprung from this stock or have slightly deviated from it by formulating a few modified doctrines of their own. Thus Jainism and Buddhism are, for the main part, not much different from Hinduism, although they have framed their own laws of life and followed their own code-makers. And, it should in no way be construed that Jainism and Buddhism have nothing new in them to offer to and better the lot of humanity. While Hinduism is more or less idealistic and ritualistic, Jainism and Buddhism are basically practical and simple in their approaches to life and its pressing problems. Again, Jainism is contrasted to Buddhism in that the former could hardly ever cross the frontiers of the country and remained mostly homely, but the latter did, and became, in due course, an international religion due to the laudable efforts of its preachers and propagators.

This book, written in a lucid style, presents the fundamental principles of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism in one place. It aims at acquainting readers, general as well as academic, with the cardinal ideas contained in these three great religions (also philosophies) of India.

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Dr. B. C. Sinha (*Released on 23-2-79*)

Men, when they were in their natural form of religion, rendered divine honour and worship to trees and plants. Probably, tree-worship is one of the earliest forms of religion in Ancient India. It was through the worship of the trees that man attempted to approach and propitiate God. In the words of Lord Buddha, "The forest is a peculiar organism of unlimited kindness and benevolence that makes no demands for its sustenance and extends generously the products of its life activity; it affords production to all beings offering shade to the axeman who destroys it." Similarly, James Fergusson observes, "With all their poetry and all their usefulness we can hardly feel astonished that the primitive races of mankind should have considered trees as the choicest gift of the gods to men." The author has beautifully described the tree-worship in Ancient India which became quite common in fourth millenium B.C., when there was a highly evolved Harrapan culture. It has continued throughout the whole period of Ancient Indian History and still remains deep in the hearts of Hindus in Modern India. The study is divided into ten chapters covering various periods, e.g., the origin, Vedic period, Tree Worship in Buddhism and Jainism, pre-Gupta period, Gupta period, Worship in South India, Medieval Hindu period, Trees in Ancient Indian Coins, etc.

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